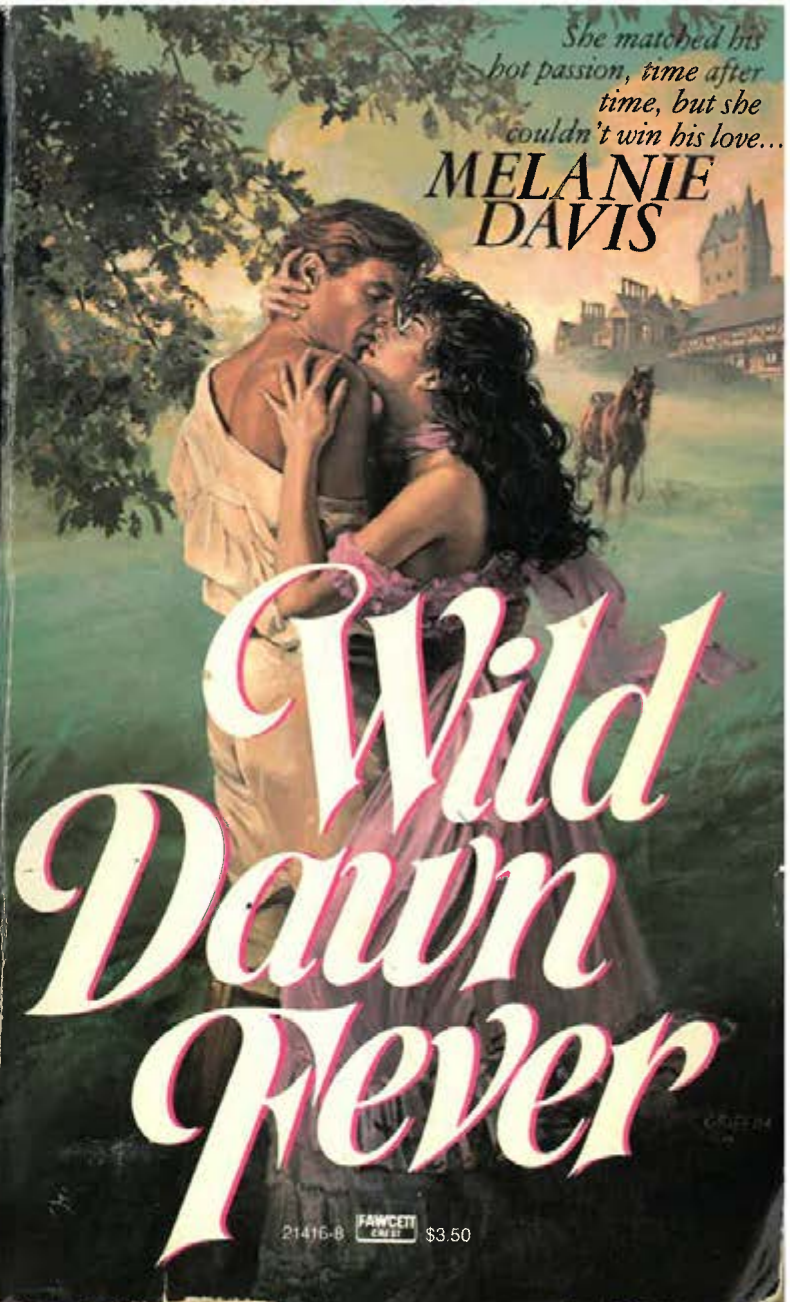




*She matched his
hot passion, time after
time, but she
couldn't win his love...*

**MELANIE
DAVIS**

Wild Dawn Fever

21416-B

FAWCETT
CREST

\$3.50

SHE COULD HAVE ANY MAN—BUT ONE....

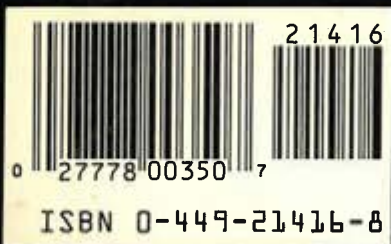
Wild Desire. Even as a young girl, carefree and spirited on her parents' Argentina ranch, Dawn Cesares was breathtakingly beautiful, her body hinting of the voluptuousness to come. And now that she's twenty, no man can resist her violet eyes, her thick mane of black hair, her magnificent figure....

Wild Passion. But Dawn's beauty is as much a danger as a blessing—as she soon learns when she is saved by the handsome, mysterious Captain Steele Norington during a horrible storm at sea....

Wild Love. From the moment Dawn's limp, water-soaked body is brought aboard his ship, Steele knows he wants her—more than any woman he has ever met. Dawn returns his lustful passion, despite the warnings in her heart, despite the fact that he does not believe in love....

Wild Dawn Fever

Where passion rules the heart, desire inflames the senses, and adventure awaits a hot-blooded Dawn...



Cover printed in USA



His mouth nibbled along the outline of her throat, then lower to her naked breasts. He took hold of them, whispering his delight in her beauty before he played with the pert nipples and teased her into a frenzy. He bent his head and suckled there, and Dawn knew she could no longer stand on her feet. She felt herself collapse, buckling, but he was there, taking her to the bed, throwing off the gown that still clung about her hips. . . .

Wild Dawn Fever

MELANIE
DAVIS

A Fawcett Crest Book
Published by Ballantine Books
Copyright © 1987 by Claudette Williams

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. Published in the United States by Ballantine Books, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, and simultaneously in Canada by Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 87-90767

ISBN 0-449-21416-8

All the characters in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

Manufactured in the United States of America

First Edition: July 1987

Part One



Chapter One

1838

Cattle swirled on the open pampas, raising some dust with their sudden animation. The quieter ones looked up with mild curiosity and, satisfied that no terror was about to strike, returned to their grazing.

The disturbance had been a pair of youthful riders racing their geldings across the rich green plains. The outcome was easy to predict. One had only to look at the great black, his coat shining in the morning sun, his muscles rippling with the stretching of strong legs. His rider urged him on, laughter gurgling in her throat as she left her challenger behind. She cooed to him softly and then began her checking, her victory in hand. He tossed his head, unwilling to yield just yet. The girl laughed again and held him with legs and hand, released and then held him again. He slowed for her. She was his mistress and the sound of her voice, the touch of her legs politely asking him to stop, recalled him to his lessons. Dawn Cesares smiled as the

horse halted beneath her, and then she turned to find her competitor racing for her and past, totally out of control!

She sat back and took stock of her friend's predicament, amusement shaking her delicate shoulders. "Ha!" she taunted. "That will teach you to pit your chestnut against my Ebony!"

Don Miguel José Miranda had by that time managed to bring in his steed and turned him. He was out of breath, but he beamed good-naturedly all the same as he trotted his chestnut gelding back toward her. "He wants manners," he said on a sheepish note, "but he is young yet, after all."

"Ah, just as I told you," she returned on a superior note.

"Oh, come down, *mocosa*," he answered her amiably.

"You call me *brat*?" She laughed and put up her chin. "That, *amigo*, is no way to speak to a lady . . . especially the lady your father and mine wishes you to wed!"

His mouth dropped, which caused her mirth to gain resonance, and she quickly reassured him, "Don't you fret, Miguel; all we must do to avoid such a terrible fate is say we shall not suit, and my father will not force the issue. . . ."

"*Sí*, but mine will!" he returned worriedly.

She cocked her head and eyed him. "My dearest friend, would that be so very bad?" She was teasing and therefore was surprised to find him look her over so seriously.

Here was Dawn Cesares, daughter of Lady Jessica and Don Rodrigo Cesares, daughter of the great La Estancia Rancho. Then, too, she was a beauty. Look at her, he said to himself.

Her leather gaucho hat had fallen by its leather strings to

her back, revealing her thick black hair, which fell unconfined and unhampered in layered curls to her waist, a magnificent mantle to her heart-shaped, piquant face. Her face, with a complexion of peaches and cream, was a gift from her mother, as were her eyes, violet flowers of lush sensitivity framed in black lashes and adorned by black winged brows. Her nose was pert, her lips full and sensuous. So then, here she was, but to Miguel, who had known her all his life, she was a sister, dear and treasured but not a source of passion.

"Dawn . . . if you will it, I would take you for wife," he said gravely.

"Foolish boy! Would you throw your life away so easily?" She shook her head. "I wouldn't."

He sat up straight in his saddle. "Ah, so I am not worthy?"

He was indeed a fine-looking young man, and of her own age, which was twenty. He was tall and slim, black-haired with soft brown eyes and fine chiseled Spanish features.

"You are most worthy, and I adore you . . . as I do my little brother." She smiled. "And you needn't worry. My mother is forever telling my father to forget the notion of our wedding each other. I leave it to her."

"Sí, Lady Jessica is most wise." He nodded.

Dawn laughed. "Wise and cunning. She had to be to manage my father all these years." Then she eyed him mischievously. "So then, am I put aside because you have eyes only for that pretty little gaucho *China* I saw you with yesterday afternoon?"

He blushed brightly and looked away. As of late he had found one of the gaucho's daughters most attractive. His

dear Dawn was as always too omniscient and too observant for his comfort. He put on his "haughty" expression. "She is naught, and you must not compare yourself with the likes of such as that."

Dawn pulled a frown at him. "You are quite horrid. Men are always such. How can you speak about her like that behind her back?"

He had the good grace to blush again but excused himself. "It is the way of the world, which you are too green to fully understand."

"Oh, I understand," she said with much disapproval.

"Dawn, it is nothing. A man needs a diversion now and then."

"Ah," she answered gravely, "of course. A man has many needs and a woman . . . has not?" There was the challenge, the old familiar argument. She discovered the helplessness of his expression, and a gurgle of mirth escaped her. She spurred her horse forward.

"You need a man to take you in hand," he said breathlessly as he caught up to her.

"Hmmm. Who, then?"

It was always thus. She would tease him, flirt with him, make him wonder if they were indeed more than friends. He looked at her seriously for a moment. "I could, you know. . . ."

"Miguel, we would be comfortable, not passionate," she answered simply.

He looked her over. She had a body to encourage a man to a great deal of passion. "Oh, I don't know. . . ."

"Miguel?" She laughed on a note of mock prudishness. "Fie! Now come, I am famished, and we are promised to my parents for lunch."

WILD DAWN FEVER

He urged his chestnut forward, and the young gelding gave off a buck in high spirits that was picked up by Dawn's black. The two youths laughed over the antics, and Dawn slowed her horse to a jog.

"You see why I don't ride sidesaddle." She breathed with a gulp of air.

"Sí, but it is most improper. If ever I do marry you, you must put off those leathers and ride like a lady!" he said severely, his eyes twinkling.

Since she was a child, Dawn had taken the habit of riding in a pair of wide leather pantaloons. Now she wore a white linen shirt open at the neck, a dark leather vest buttoned neatly to the hip, and a well-worn pair of leather riding pants. "Making me ride like a lady has been a feat beyond my parents, so I doubt that you would be able to accomplish it." She shrugged her shoulders. "Besides . . . here in the wilds . . . what does it matter?"

He eyed her. "You did not wear leathers in England?"

She sighed. "That was different. One had to conform, if only to prove one was not a savage," she gurgled. She had always enjoyed her trips to her mother's native home; there had been four in the last six years, and each had been better than the last.

"You are incorrigible," he said, and reached out to tweak her cheek.

"And so, I am twenty and without a husband, the despair of all my family." She glittered with the words.

"Yes, and you shall remain an old maid if you don't mend your ways!" He wagged a mocking finger.

They had reached the Cesares stables by this time, and two young gauchos came forward to take their horses. Lady Dawn gave the urchins a friendly smile and had their

horses taken off to be walked and rubbed down. She turned and linked her arm through her friend's, and they started walking toward the hacienda.

Don Rodrigo stood at the large panoramic window he had installed for his wife's pleasure. It was lead-paned, from England, and afforded a wide view of his Spanish gardens and the walk to the stables. He watched his daughter laughing with Don Miguel as the two came toward the house, and he clasped his hands at his back.

"Well?" he said by way of a question and without turning to look at his wife.

She looked up from her mail, for the last letter had greatly disturbed her, and absently threw back his question. "Well?"

He looked over his shoulder. She never ceased to move him. In all these years, twenty-two of them, she always aroused him to all the emotions. She was forty-two and as beautiful now with white streaking her golden hair as she had been at twenty.

"Your daughter," he responded gruffly. "Will she take Miguel, do you think?"

"No," Lady Jessica answered quietly. "As much as you might like it, she will not."

"But they are forever laughing together," he said on a note of exasperation. "Think how it looks to everyone."

"And I was always laughing with Pauly, but I don't think that would have been enough to sustain me. . . ." There was the tease in her voice, a certain light in her eyes.

He moved toward her now, his hands no longer clasped at his back. His own black hair was heavily laced with

silver, but the lines of age had only served to increase the magnetism of his masculinity. He touched her chin almost roughly.

"No, my minx, you needed more. . . ." His voice was low and full with his meaning.

"Which you gave me . . . give me still. . . ."

"Faith!" said their daughter, who had walked in on them. "Don't you know you are too old for these antics?" She giggled. "And we have a guest. What will Miguel think?"

Miguel was blushing, but it was not the first time he had walked in on the Cesareses to find such a scene.

Lady Jessica got to her feet. "Ah, I am glad you are here," she said, ignoring her daughter's teasing. "This letter just arrived, and it encloses one for you."

Don Rodrigo's brow went up as he watched his wife give Dawn the letter and the sealed envelope. He glanced askance at his wife, but she would only touch his arm and say "Rodrigo . . . Miguel must be thirsty after his ride. . . ."

They always spoke in English at the Cesares rancho out of deference to Lady Jessica, whose Spanish had improved over the years but not enough to yield her the natural comfort of her own language.

"What is this, Mama . . . ?" Dawn was surprised as she scanned the letter. "This is for you . . . from your cousin Charles. Why should I read it?"

Her mother touched her wrist, and violet eyes looked long into violet eyes. "It is sad news about your great-aunt Gussie," she said softly.

Dawn took an involuntary step backward. "Aunt Gussie?"

She saw the answer in her mother's expression, and reacted. "Mama . . . oh, no . . ."

"Dearest, she was eighty-four years old, and she had something of a very interesting life."

"She may have been eighty-four, and she may have had an interesting life, but, Mama . . . I am not ready to lose her." Dawn felt an overwhelming sense of anger, and there was a sharpness to her tone that carried across the room. Her father and Miguel looked briefly in their direction, but her father carried on with his discussion, taking Miguel across the hall to the study with the intention of showing him his latest firearm.

Dawn's face was troubled, and she took to pacing. "Oh, Mama, I wanted to see her one more time."

Her mother waited for her to stop her pacing and moved to hold her arm. "Your aunt Augusta wanted that, too . . . and it would appear that you took the place of all others."

"What do you mean?"

"Gussie always said that her only regret in spurning marriage was having to forgo the pleasure of having her own child." Lady Jessica smiled sadly. "I think you should read my letter from Charles and yours from your aunt."

"Mama . . . I wasn't a child to Aunt Gussie," Dawn said simply. "We were friends."

Her mother smiled. "So it would seem." She moved away, and when she reached the door, added, "I will see to lunch. Miguel must be hungry, and then after lunch, we will talk."

Dawn frowned but moved to the corner of the large room where an English Regency writing desk had been

WILD DAWN FEVER

neatly situated. She sat there and with an air of resignation spread out the first letter already opened by her mother.

My Lady Jess.

Cousin, it grieves me to have to advise you that your aunt, Lady Augusta Stafford, died yesterday morning. I hope you will forgive me, but it was best, for in these last months her health had faded, leaving her with a great deal of pain. Because she was 84, we had, I believe, taught ourselves that death was near, and even so, it still managed to shock us when it came.

I am told there is a sizable inheritance, which is something of a surprise. I am also told that she has left it all to your daughter, Dawn, which is not a surprise.

You will find enclosed herewith a sealed envelope. It was written by Aunt Augusta just before her passing; it is for Dawn.

No doubt you will be booking passage as soon as may be, as there are some matters that must be settled in regards to your lovely daughter's inheritance.

In the meantime, I trust you will receive a copy of Lady Augusta's will from her solicitors.

I hope this letter finds you all well and happy. I hope to hear from you soon regarding your plans.

*I am, as ever, your most obedient,
Charles Stafford
6th Earl of Redcliff*

Dawn sighed. Gussie gone. How her feisty old aunt had made her laugh. England would not seem the same without her. Charles? There was something about him she had not liked when they had met four years ago. He had inherited the title and the estate from her mother's uncle. He was by now about thirty years old, and, as she recalled, he had been handsome in a polished way, but there was something lacking in his soul.

She took up her aunt's letter and looked at it before she broke the wax seal.

My own wild Dawn,

I never took the trouble to know your mother; I am glad you made a push to know me. I can still remember that very first time I met you. You were only eight, and you stole my heart with your smile.

You were planning a visit in September. Forgive me, I don't think I can manage to be here for you, and I did so want to be the one to give you a ball. Instead I have charged that office to Charles, and he will do it.

I have decided to make you very rich because it amuses me to allow you that independence you are bent on having. I have decided to give you all the earthly treasures I possess because you gave me a child's honest love, and no other ever had.

Don't let them tame you, my own wild Dawn.

Gussie

A tear formed and found its passage to the page below.

WILD DAWN FEVER

Gussie was gone. Dawn's mother peeped in at the open door.

"Come, love. Miguel and your father await us in the dining room." When her daughter did not respond, she urged, "Come on, then, and we will talk later."

Her breeding was such that she knew she had to put aside all thoughts of Gussie and get through lunch. Mourning was a private thing, and she had learned how to handle tragedy. Her grandfather's passing some years ago had been enough of a test. She got to her feet and said softly, "Yes, of course, Mama."

When she reached her mother, Lady Jessica whispered, "I am, as always, very proud of you."

"Dawnie!" It was José, Dawn's ten-year-old brother. "Come quick! Ladybell is foaling!"

Being a horsewoman, all else was shoved quickly aside as Dawn released a crow of excitement and ran along to the stables with him. Being an avid horsewoman herself, Lady Jessica smiled and went to explain the delay to the men.

Chapter Two

***H**heavy rains and a dark, depressing sky were the order of the day and did little to cheer the atmosphere of the Cesares library. Dawn paced. Her hands were clasped at her midriff, and her face was drawn in irritation. Her father was being unreasonable, and so she told him.*

“But, Papa, I am nearly of age . . . and after all—”

“Enough!” He put up his hand. “I will not have you travel to England alone, and that is final.” His own countenance was certainly not a happier picture.

Lady Jessica said little during their exchange. Instead she waited for them to have it out with each other. She waited for both to stand in helpless silence: Dawn because she had no other argument to put forth, and Don Rodrigo because it gave him no pleasure to see his daughter so rebellious. It was at this juncture that she said quietly, “My dearest husband, you are, as ever, most correct. Our Dawn should not travel alone . . . but—”

WILD DAWN FEVER

He cut her short. "Jess! There are no buts in this matter."

She put up her chin, and even now in the heat of his annoyance, this familiar action, peculiar to herself, had the power to soften his anger. "As I was saying," she put forth, "*but* Dawn need not travel alone."

Two pairs of eyes widened in some surprise as father and daughter surveyed Lady Jessica's placid countenance. "How, pray, is that?" managed Don Rodrigo, his dark brows up.

"Maria will be with her, for one thing," proceeded Lady Jessica easily. "And Doña Inez as well."

"Doña Inez?" Dawn groaned. "Oh, no. . . ."

"Ah, Doña Inez travels to England. . . ." Don Rodrigo was mollified. "How do you know this?" He eyed his wife warily.

Doña Inez, Dawn said to herself as the picture of that large, stern woman came to mind. She grimaced to no one in particular and went off into a soulful moan.

"I know, my dearest heart, because I made it my business to find out who would be traveling to England." She touched his cheek. "You see, Dawn really must go to England. We cannot leave at this time. . . ." Her eyes lowered to her stomach. She was once again with child, and because she was in her early forties, the doctor had preached caution. "But Dawn must."

"We will speak of this later," Don Rodrigo announced, thus momentarily preserving his pride.

Dawn contemplated three weeks on board a confined sailing vessel with the lady in question and said in pitiful accents, "Mama, Doña Inez?"

Day had settled into a soft dusky sky. The sun was fast vanishing as Dawn rode her black across the pampas on her way home. She had been visiting with her friends, but because she had not taken a groom, her father had drawn a promise from her to return before dark.

A brisk wind had taken on force, and she felt the coolness through the soft dark leather of her short-waisted jacket. Her high-crowned and silver-studded hat had fallen to her back, its string holding her long black hair somewhat in place against her neatly formed back. She made an enticing picture.

A young gaucho of some considerable stature sat his horse, allowing it to graze as he watched her progress. He was an imposing figure himself in the unmistakable garb of his kind. He had only started working at the Cesares rancho some months ago, but Dawn had quickly caught his eye and his dreams.

Within his first week, Don Rodrigo had nearly sent him packing, but Dawn had been on hand and had asked her father to give him another chance. Thereafter he had managed to keep out of Don Rodrigo's path, and as his work improved, he kept his job. It wasn't the job that kept him temporarily in line; it was Dawn's smile, the curve of her body, the outrageousness of her style, the spirit of her temperament. He had decided he would have her and thought her kindness in his regard was an indication that this would be an easy enough task.

He saw her now and raised his hand in greeting. She smiled. She liked Meza. He had a way of looking at her that was thrilling somehow. He was certainly good-looking, and when he spoke to her in English, he was most charming. In her innocence she had flirted with him. She was

young, and experimenting was natural. She had no idea that she had been leading him on. She called out that she had no time, but he forestalled her. "But, my Dawn . . . one moment . . ." he called after her, spurring his horse forward until he saw her slow and halt her black.

"I am sorry, Meza, but I am expected back at the hacienda," she said on a breathless note.

"Then, perhaps you will allow Meza to escort you." It was not a question as he tooled his horse into stride beside hers.

"Thank you, Meza." There was the slightest hesitation in her voice. She knew this would be trouble. Her father would not like to see her in Meza's company.

"Ah, you are afraid of Papa?" he challenged.

Her chin went up. "Of course not. I choose my own friends."

"Even a peon?"

"Even a peon," she said with a sweet smile. "But you, sir, are a gaucho. A proud race equal to all."

She had no notion what aspirations she inspired in him. His heart had naught to do with this, but gauchos had married into money before. Wasn't there Don Rodrigo's cousin Maria and the gaucho Varjona, who managed the Cesares rancho? *Sí*, he thought, he would seduce the pretty Dawn and perhaps manage such a marriage.

"I have not seen very much of you this week," he said, for indeed it was true.

"Hmmm. I have been shopping for my trip to England," she said absently, thinking that they would soon reach the Cesares orchards, where she could take a short-cut to the stable.

He put out his hand and held her wrist sharply. This was

the first he had heard about her going to England. "You are going away?"

She laughed at his expression. "Not forever."

"*Sí*, but you go? Why?" he demanded.

She eyed him seriously now. He was overstepping the bounds she would allow. "Why?" She returned his question. "Why do you ask?"

"You break my heart," he answered.

She laughed, thinking he was being gallant. "You are a devil. *I* break your heart? No, my buck, it is you who breaks hearts, not I."

"What is this? Who says such things of me?"

She laughed wickedly. "Everyone."

"It is not true." He knew he had a reputation with the women in town, but he had not thought it possible that she would have heard of it. He stopped her horse, jumped easily, nimbly down from his, and came round to her. "This is a serious matter. You must speak with me before you go home." He reached up for her waist with every intention of lifting her out of her saddle.

One of her breaks with tradition was her style of riding. Dawn nearly always rode astride instead of with a lady's saddle, so she could not easily be taken against her will now. She frowned at him and remained mounted. "Meza . . . we haven't the time to dally now."

"Make the time for me. You say you are going—then have pity on me. . . . Give me this moment."

She sighed and bade him stand off as she dismounted herself, jumping lightly to the ground and taking rein in hand. She turned to him. "Now, what is it you want, *amigo*?"

WILD DAWN FEVER

He decided the best course was action. "This, my pretty," he said softly, and took her into his arms.

She was taken by surprise. She was excited in spite of herself. Meza was attractive, and she had often wondered what it would be like to be kissed by him. Miguel had some years ago attempted to kiss her, and they had ended it in laughter and much jesting, but this, this was so very different.

His mouth sought her own with ferocity, and his hands held her to him with a steel-like firmness she could not break. Meza's kiss was wildly exuberant, born of frustration and sudden impulse. It was the rush of fantasy that worked his passion and the absence of wisdom that blinded his reason. He had experience with women but not with maids and certainly not a virgin girl such as Dawn Cesares.

The initial touch of excitement he had incited in her veins was expelled by his roughness, exploded by his daring, and brutalized by his pursuit when she tried to pull away. He frightened and then angered her, until she managed to yank out of his grip, bruising herself as she escaped. She backed away from him, reproachfully ejaculating, "Meza!"

He reached for her, but she was already in her stirrup, and her black went forward even before she was in the saddle. At that moment Meza was diverted by the unromantic side of reality. His roan reasonably decided it would be a very good thing to follow the black and its mistress home, where there would certainly be some hay and water, and thus picked up his head and started forward. Meza had to move quickly in order to snatch up the dangling reins and interfere with his horse's intentions.

This done, his horse properly chastised, he stood a long

moment and contemplated his wounded pride. It was not the first time someone had thought herself better than he. It was not the first time his reaction led him to plan revenge. His was not a good moral fiber. More than once he had taken his revenge and run. This is what Don Rodrigo had sensed and disliked in Meza, and Meza had known it.

“So . . .” He reverted to Spanish, low and guttural. “Your daughter, Don Rodrigo, does not think I am good enough for her. So. She means to go to England and find herself an English lord? *Sí*, she may do so . . . but first I think I will have her before I move on. . . .”

Chapter Three

The time was fast closing in. In two days she would be boarding the *Flying Cloud* bound for England. It was so exciting, but then she remembered Doña Inez and sighed.

Miguel was with her, handing her horse over to one of the Cesares grooms, then taking up her elbow to lead her to the house. He stopped to arch an eyebrow at her. "Why the sudden long face?"

She pouted at him. "Long face? I have been grinning at your tricks all morning. What do you mean, you dreadful man?" There was the old, familiar banter in her voice, in the softness of her violet eyes.

He patted her gloved hand. "There, that is better; but you did pull a face a moment ago . . . and by the way, ladies of fashion do *not* grin!"

She was taken aback by this. "Don't they? How very dull it must be for them." Then with a purposefully wide grin, she countered, "I must change all that."

He laughed and tweaked her nose. "Monkey. Now, what is the matter? You cannot fool an old friend."

"Miguel . . . you won't think me ungrateful . . . ?"

"Now, that is something else. No doubt, I shall, but go ahead, unburden yourself. Why are you ungrateful to me?"

"Not to you, you silly boy. To my mother." She shook her head at him.

"Ah, the plot thickens." He was beaming.

"Do be serious, Miguel. She managed Papa, you know, and if it weren't for her, I wouldn't be going on this trip . . . but Miguel, she arranged for me to travel with Doña Inez!"

"Ayeeee . . ." Miguel took pity. "I know."

"Can you imagine me in that woman's company for three weeks with nothing around us but ocean?"

He closed his eyes. "Poor Doña Inez . . ."

She slapped his forearm and brought him to order. "You are hopeless and have no understanding whatsoever!"

He took her shoulders and bent to drop a kiss upon her nose and then another lightly on her lips. "I don't know, my brat. Perhaps I should marry you and keep you by my side. Truth is, it will be dull work without you."

This satisfied her enough to make her forget her grievances. She smiled pertly at him, linked her arm through his, and proceeded to the hacienda, much in good spirits with him.

In the background, unnoticed, Meza stood. His ire was fed by the sight of Don Miguel bending so easily to give Dawn a kiss. What, this fool, this dandy, found favor in her eyes? Meza fumed over it. He did not bother to note that their kiss had lacked any discernible passion. He only knew that she had allowed it to happen. He only saw her draw closer and smile at Miguel. He only felt the jealousy of a man who wants what he cannot have.

WILD DAWN FEVER

What to do? All this time had passed, and he had not been able to catch her alone. She would be leaving in two days. That left him little time. Tonight, then. Perhaps he would have to resort to the most dangerous of his plans. It would mean he would have to steal away by night, escape into the mountains, travel hard and fast . . . perhaps out of Argentina? *Sí*, but it would be worth it to exact his revenge on Dawn and her arrogant father!

There was a sweet-scented night air, and dinner had been a lively meeting of select close friends, as Lady Jessica had wanted an intimate gathering for her daughter's bon voyage. However, the hour was late, and Lady Jessica eyed her Dawn with a raised brow, giving her an unarguable dismissal.

Dawn laughed and indicated an ending with a nod of her head. "Mama bids me good night." She gave Miguel her hand, and he held it for a long moment as he looked deep into her violet eyes.

She was a beauty. In her gown of white froth with her black hair done up in highly styled curls, she was everything a man could want. How could he let her go? He was very fond of her; perhaps he even loved her. It was so hard to say . . . so difficult to know what he felt.

"Dawn?" He was suddenly serious. "I . . . I just don't know now if I can let you go. . . ."

She giggled. "Don't you? Well, then, you tell Mama—"

"I don't mean just now. I mean . . . I don't know if I should let you go to England."

It was her turn to become serious. People were already taking their leave of her mother and father. She was

waving, throwing a kiss, but she brought her violet eyes to Miguel's face. "Whatever do you mean?"

"You will go to England and no doubt find your knight in shining armor, and this time I will lose you forever." He sighed with the thought.

She laughed and touched his cheek. "Lose me? Dearest Miguel. You will take a wife and I . . . one day will take a husband, but *we* will always have, at the very least, the memory of our shared youth and the truth of our friendship." She looked up and saw that her father was approaching. "Uh-oh."

Don Rodrigo smiled as he reached for his daughter's hand. He took it up, dropped a light kiss upon her fingers, and said softly, "Your last day with us tomorrow will be in all certainty a very busy one. I think you may be able to convince me to allow you to retire, my little one."

She giggled, got to her toes, and gave her father a kiss, turned and threw one to Miguel, and was gone. He stood beside her father for a moment and shook his head. "I will miss her."

"Won't we all," said her father.

Miguel frowned. There was something else troubling him. Dawn had mentioned Meza's behavior toward her some weeks ago and made him promise not to repeat the story to her father. He had refused her the promise but had compromised by saying he would not immediately tell any tales. He had used the time to observe Meza whenever opportunity had allowed, and what he had seen had made him uneasy. In another day Dawn would be gone, but even so, Don Rodrigo should know what sort of man he had riding so freely over his land. After all, Miguel had sisters,

WILD DAWN FEVER

and he knew he and his father would not have someone like Meza working at their rancho.

"Don Rodrigo," he said softly, "there is a matter that has me troubled." He was speaking in Spanish now, which he did not usually do in the Cesares home. It made Don Rodrigo look at him and raise a brow.

"Oh? Can it wait until our guests have gone and my lady has retired?"

"Indeed," agreed Don Miguel at once. "I think it must."

Don Rodrigo nodded. "Then, if you will . . . await me in the library."

"At your pleasure," answered Miguel.

Don Rodrigo went off to join his wife and see the last of their guests off. What was this? he wondered: Was Miguel finally ready to ask for Dawn's hand? Why, if this was so, it was beyond everything great, for it was what he wanted with all his heart!

Meza stood in the darkness of the night watching one of the Cesares studs graze in the stud paddock. He wore no hat, and his black billowy shirt was open to the waist. A passing servant girl looked long and wistfully in his direction, for he was certainly an attractive man. He didn't notice her, for his mind was elsewhere.

Soon, soon, everyone would leave; soon Lady Jessica and Don Rodrigo would retire to bed; soon Dawn would be alone in her room. He sneered. Don Rodrigo thought himself so safe, thought his daughter safe within the splendor of their hacienda. Well, he, Meza, would show them all they were naught against him! He would soon play out

his plans and feel the satisfaction of their fruition. He was Meza. He was a gaucho, and he knew his own worth.

As Meza waited he felt proud of himself. Ah, he thought, he was quite a man. What other would dare what he intended? Here was Dawn Cesares. Her father was a powerful ranchero. He would have to run and run fast to escape the Cesareses' wrath after this night's work, but it would be worth it to beat them, and beat them he would, through Dawn.

He knew just how he would do it. She had the habit of leaving her lead-paned French doors slightly ajar. These doors led onto her bedroom's garden patio. This was protected by high stone walls her father had erected for her privacy, but Meza had scaled their heights before to watch for her. It would be so easy. He would teach her to spurn his attentions. With his decision still hot in his mind he moved off in the direction of the hacienda's long wing, hugging its flank until he reached Dawn's garden wall.

He was up and over with a light nimble skill, but he stood quiet, waiting catlike as he listened. She was within her room, speaking with her maid. He must wait.

Maria was many things to Dawn. She was a petite woman and stood in her heeled shoes no more than five feet tall. Her grayish-black hair was fixed in a tight knot at the back of her small head. Her age was a mystery to the household, but she was thought to be in her early fifties, a fact she used and abused whenever the need arose. For Dawn she had always been there: at first Maria had been her nanny, for Lady Jessica's health had been unstable after Dawn's birth; later Maria had taken on the role of second mother, a fact that often amused Lady Jessica.

Maria's English had always been quite good, but now and then she would lapse into Spanish when she became flustered as she was now. "*Nada logras con llorar delante del bien perdido.*" She wagged her finger for further emphasis.

Dawn laughed and put her hands on her hips. "I wasn't crying over spilt milk. I was only saying that it was too bad I couldn't think of Miguel as . . . as someone other than a brother." And then before Maria could retort (for Maria joined Don Rodrigo in the hopes that Miguel and Dawn would make a match), Dawn added, "And do speak in English, Maria; you will soon have to, you know."

"Ay-yi-yi, that is so." Maria shook her head. "Why we are to go to that cold, strange wet place again. . . . There are enough lovely men for you to choose from right here in Buenos Aires. . . ."

"Ah, perhaps," teased Dawn, "but you know I have always had an eye for Irish rogues and English gentlemen!"

"Brat!" said Maria, and swatted her charge's rump.

Dawn wasn't finished yet. She made naughty eyes and swayed coyly before the older woman. "Besides, there is every good chance that you will get to see Chester again."

Maria's shoulders went up with her chin. "What do I care for such as he?"

"Oh, I don't know, but I seem to recall you casting a smile in his direction the last time we were at Stafford House."

"Never you mind!" warned Maria. She sniffed. "He is English and has no passion."

Dawn giggled. "But, Maria, I am English, and I think I have some passion."

"You, my little one, have more than is safe . . . but

that you get from your Spanish blood," Maria announced smugly. "Now come, let me help you with that gown."

Meza stood, his heart pounding wildly, his blood racing and his thoughts clashing. There, the maid was leaving the room, and Dawn was putting out her nightstand candle. The room was dark, still, and quiet. He couldn't make a sound. If he did, she would call out, perhaps scream. No, he must wait until she was asleep.

He went down to the stone patio and bent his knees. Here he was, Meza, only minutes away from victory over Cesares. It was a good feeling. He undid the buttons of his billowy shirt. He pulled the scarf off his neck and stuffed it into a pocket. He took off his hat and dropped it beside him, thought better of it, and took it up again. This was nerve-racking, this waiting. How could he wait any longer? He got up and took a step toward the glass doors. He could make out her form in the large bed. She had tossed off her covers and was lying on her belly, her face turned to the opposite wall. She was scantily encased in a frothy pink nightdress, and her long black hair flowed in waves over her back.

Boldly he stepped into the room, and for a moment he questioned silently, "Mother of God . . . what am I doing?" Still he proceeded and found himself standing beside her bed looking down at her. Dawn felt something, she didn't know what, but it made her move onto her elbows and look round and up. It was dark, but surely there was someone standing over her? Who? Her father?

"Papa?"

He growled, dropped his hat to the floor, and was on her, his hand over her mouth, her body pinned beneath his own. "No, not Papa!" he answered her in guttural Spanish.

WILD DAWN FEVER

"Meza!" She was frightened, but here was Meza whom she had once trusted. His name was a muffled sound behind the hand he held to her mouth. What did this mean? What was he doing? She tried again to say his name and bring some order to the situation, but again it was an inaudible sound.

"*Sí, Meza,*" he sneered, his face so close to hers, and his teeth gritted. "Meza, who is not good enough for you." He was yanking out his scarf from his pocket, sliding it between her teeth, roughly handling her with his one free arm.

Dawn struggled beneath him, but he had her pinned, and she was amazed that she wasn't able to do more than she had. All at once she understood. It came to her in a wave of terror. Meza meant to take her, here and now, in her own room, in her father's house! Her large violet eyes opened wide, and she started to scramble in his hold, hurting herself in the struggle. He had no pity. He hauled off and hit her with his open hand, and she was stunned into silence. She couldn't think. She didn't know what to do. No one had ever handled her in such a fashion before, and she felt a certain shock leave her rigid.

He had her gagged and proceeded to use the pieces of rope he had prepared. He folded her over onto her belly and tied her wrists at her back before he turned her over once again. She was still as she watched him, and he considered her a moment.

"It is too bad you will not be able to use your hands . . . your lips. It would have made the experience so much more pleasurable for you." He shrugged his shoulders. "But I am not here for your pleasure." He smiled. "Not this time." He started removing his shirt.

Chapter Four

*L*ady Jessica had retired for the night, leaving her husband with Don Miguel in the library. Don Rodrigo took a final sip of his brandy and put the glass down firmly. He was impatient to join his wife, and Miguel was not getting to the point.

"Well . . . do you mean to tell me tonight, or do we wait for the dawn?"

Miguel blushed. "I have hesitated, I know, but it is such a delicate matter and . . . and the truth is, your daughter may feed me to the sea when she is told I have—"

"Ah," interrupted Don Rodrigo, "this grows suddenly interesting. Dawn and you have a secret?" His eyebrows were up.

"I suppose . . . but it is not what you are thinking." All at once Miguel felt deuced uncomfortable.

"And what am I thinking?" Don Rodrigo could be the very devil at times.

"I don't know. . . ." Miguel saw the amusement on

Don Rodrigo's face and smiled sheepishly. "It is probably nothing, but I rather thought you should know about Meza."

Don Rodrigo was at attention immediately. "Meza? What about Meza?"

Even now Don Miguel was reluctant. He hesitated again and then blurted out, "I just don't think he is the sort of man you want working for you."

"Don't you? Why not?"

"He is not loyal to your rancho" was all Miguel wanted to say at this point. He could visualize Dawn's violet eyes blasting him to Hades.

"Is he not?" It was precisely what Don Rodrigo had always felt, but he wanted Miguel to elaborate.

"This is very difficult for me," said Miguel on an exasperated sigh. "Dawn will in all surety put a stake through my heart."

"Will she, indeed? Why?"

"She told me something in confidence because she felt one mistake must be forgiven. . . . She didn't want Meza to lose his job, you see, but the more I think about it the more I feel I must tell you."

"Really?" Don Rodrigo did not agree. His code of ethics was always strong, and if Miguel had given his word to Dawn, he did not want the lad to break it. "I think that perhaps it is Dawn who should tell me what this is about . . . or release you from your promise." He started across the room.

Don Miguel put his hand through his hair. "Don Rodrigo . . . Don Rodrigo . . . wait, you don't understand."

Don Rodrigo turned at that and said gently, "Don't I?"

Meza dropped his shirt to the floor and took a moment to stare at Dawn's face. She was white with fear, but she was not moving. Slowly he found his way to her breast, and this made her buck furiously. She rolled and managed to bring up one knee, throwing him off balance. As she lunged away from him, he reached out, and she fell to the floor so hard she was winded and gasping for breath as she choked on the scarf in her mouth.

He was cursing her in low, guttural Spanish as he yanked her up by her long black hair and threw her back onto the bed. In one fell swoop he had torn part of her nightdress away from her body and straddled her. She continued to struggle as he undid the buttons of his pantaloons and stopped long enough to administer her another slap across her cheek. This time he had not stunned her. She knew now what he was about; she knew now what he intended, and she knew she had only one chance—to make enough noise to stir the household.

Meza held her hair and twisted it savagely as he hissed, "Enough! Another sound . . . you make another sound, and you will suffer." His gaucho knife was produced and bared so that it glinted in the dim light of the room. "You understand, woman?"

Lady Jessica's intuition was on the loose. Something, she couldn't tell what, was making her feel uneasy. She paced in her bedchamber as she waited for her husband to join her. Curiosity, she told herself, was at the heart of her agitation. It was Miguel. What could Miguel want with Don Rodrigo? That Miguel might be asking for Dawn's hand was not an acceptable answer; she knew better.

WILD DAWN FEVER

What, then? What was taking so long? Did it have something to do with Dawn?

A sudden emotional decision sent her to her bedroom door, but her hand stopped short of the latch. This was absurd. She couldn't barge in on the men. She couldn't just go to Dawn and bother her at this hour . . . could she? Dawn was a woman—well, she was twenty, and not a babe to be tucked in. . . .

No, not tucked in—Lady Jessica took hold of the doorknob—but she could kiss her good night if she wished to! After all, she was her mother. She stepped out into the hall and bit her lip. This was silly. Perhaps she should just check her impulses and wait for her husband. Yes, of course. She returned to her room, and with a sigh, sat herself down.

In the library Don Rodrigo's brow was up impatiently as he waited for Don Miguel to proceed. "Well, lad . . . don't I?"

"I don't mean any disrespect, sir," answered Don Miguel, who was beginning to feel extremely uncomfortable. "Of course *you* would understand, but I . . . well, I didn't want you to feel any blame was attached to Dawn's behavior." The thought that she would certainly hold him accountable for this night's work had Miguel quite frantic by now.

Don Rodrigo said sternly, "Ah, but until I hear this story from my daughter's lips, that is precisely how I do feel." He turned on his heel and left the room.

Don Miguel crossed himself and hastily made to follow. What he could do, he wasn't quite sure, but it wouldn't be the first time he had stood beside Dawn during one of her

father's rages, and since he had induced this one, it was the least he could do to be on the scene.

Don Rodrigo halted his progress and turned on Miguel with a frown. "What do you think you are doing?"

"I . . . I rather thought I might be allowed to—" He gulped, unable to answer.

"Very well," said Don Rodrigo, smiling, but only to himself.

Dawn heard Meza's tone and knew he meant what he threatened. She saw the knife and understood its power. He would kill her. Was fighting him worth her life? He would violate her whether she fought or no, but at least if she fought, perhaps a semblance of pride could be preserved? She only knew she had to fight, but how? She must do something. Her hands were held captive above her head, tied at the wrists by an ungiving rope. What to do? As she twisted she felt something lacy at her fingertips. What was that? Faith! It was the lace covering of her nightstand. If she could manage to . . . yes, yes, she had it between her fingers, and all she had to do was pull . . . pull!

It wasn't much, but even so it was enough to dislodge the three-tiered candelabra off her nightstand. It went crashing to the brightly polished wooden floor below. Outside her bedroom door Don Rodrigo's hand stilled as he heard the crash, and he called to his daughter instead of knocking.

"Dawn . . . Dawn, are you all right?"

She couldn't answer, and Meza acted quickly, taking her up and off the bed with a low-hissed curse. He poised the knife at her neck, expecting the inevitable.

Don Rodrigo felt a shiver rush up his spine, and he did

WILD DAWN FEVER

not bother knocking as he tried the door. It swung open wide, and the vision that met his eyes was enough to shake a lesser man. A lesser man, but not Don Rodrigo Cesares. His reaction was quick, hard, and displayed absolutely no fear. Here was Meza holding his daughter, his Dawn, with a knife at her throat. He could see that her wrists were bound and that she was gagged, but her feet . . . ah, her feet were free, and she was after all, his daughter! She would know when to move. He gave her a long, meaningful glare before he spoke, and when he spoke, it was enough to frighten a man like Meza.

"Do you think, Meza, even with a knife at my daughter's throat, that I shall let you live to see tomorrow?" he said in Spanish.

"And how will you stop me?" Meza spat. "You must fear for your daughter's life. I will kill her if you try and follow us."

"Do you think so? Even now my men are gathering at your back," said Don Rodrigo.

Meza killed the impulse to look behind himself. He released a short nervous laugh. "You think to trick me? I am no fool."

At Don Rodrigo's back, Don Miguel stood frozen. He marveled at Rodrigo's strength of character, for he felt himself in shock. Here was Meza holding Dawn by the throat . . . damn, the knife was so close. He saw Rodrigo's hand move imperceptibly in the shadow of the door's threshold, and suddenly he knew. He couldn't breathe. He knew what was coming next, and he couldn't breathe.

"Meza . . . think. Why am I here? Why did I come to my daughter's room? I was told that something was suspicious about your movements tonight. You were seen com-

ing in this direction, and as a precaution, I had my men take up their guns and . . .” he lied convincingly.

Meza couldn't help himself; he held tight to Dawn and swung partially around to see if this was true. Was there a gun at his back? He still had the girl . . . but he had to protect his back. It was all that was needed, for indeed, Rodrigo knew his daughter well. With presence of mind she used the moment of his uncertainty and came down hard on his shoeless foot—for gauchos never wore shoes. Her uncovered heel was not enough to do damage, but it was enough to loosen his hold. She yanked hard and fell to the ground, and her father's aim was sure. His own gaucho knife, a decorative but deadly piece, found its mark in Meza's throat!

Chapter Five

Overlooking New York's busy harbor was the office of Brown & Bell. Theirs was a prestigious firm, among the top shipbuilders of their day. Robert Forbes had always used their services when he had his designs for his China clippers put into production. He now stood alone with Steele, Lord Norington and raised his glass of brandy to the Englishman.

"Having inspected your *Lightning*, I must agree, you just may beat my record."

His lordship inclined his head of graying ginger waves and smiled ruefully. "I thank you for the compliment, and though it is my fervent hope to do so, I am beginning to have my doubts."

Forbes raised an eyebrow. "Oh? Why is that? When you first arrived here, you seemed fairly certain that you had designed and built the clipper that could beat my ninety-five days and fourteen hours to Canton, China."

"That, sir, was before I had the privilege of inspecting *your* clipper!"

Forbes smiled, well pleased with this, and touched his thin nose. He liked the Englishman and respected the man's mind. With a sudden decision he crossed the finely polished oak floor to a wide, ornately detailed desk and unlocked its center drawer. He withdrew a thick wad of sketches and began unfolding them.

"Come here, Steele. I want you to have a look at these."

The Englishman went to stand beside the older American as Forbes proceeded in some excitement. "I hope you may beat my record, but don't count on clippers lasting out another decade. I mean to replace them."

His lordship's dark brow moved expressively. "Do you?"

"Aye. Oh . . . I love them. They served their purpose and shall continue to do so. I made my money with them, but that was with the opium trade and my family—well, they have their objections. They want me home in Boston and out of the opium trade." He spread out the first sheet of sketches and said with some excitement, "Know what this is?"

His lordship's years numbered three and thirty, and for not many years less he had always found himself drawn to the sea and ships. He knew what he was looking at was something revolutionary. He breathed. "Whew! Tell me, is *that* a steamship?"

"Ha! Steamship, is it? Yes, by God, but not just any steamship. It is an iron steamship." He brought out another sketch. "And this, my lad, is my screw propeller!"

His lordship studied the drawings for a moment longer before he drew back and again inclined his head, this time with admiration. "My dear Forbes, I rather think you have a treasure here." It was quietly, respectfully said.

WILD DAWN FEVER

Forbes sighed with satisfaction. "So I have tried to make Brown & Bell believe."

"And don't they?"

"Ah, no, I don't think so, but they mean to go along with me and finance my venture all the same."

"All my good wishes, Mr. Forbes," said his lordship.

"And to you, my lord," said Forbes. "I will be leaving for Boston in the morning and will not be here to see you off, but I expect to hear that you have beaten the record from New York to Canton in the near future." Forbes extended his hand.

His lordship smiled. "Then it is my fondest hope to send you such news."

It was just at the same moment when his lordship and Mr. Forbes were shaking hands in New York that Dawn Cesares looked at her mother from the deck of the *Flying Cloud* in Buenos Aires and wailed, "But, Mama . . . where can she be?" Doña Inez had not yet arrived to lend her duennaship to Dawn's expedition.

Lady Jessica looked up and down the length of the ship and saw her husband coming toward them. "Ah, here is your father. He does not look very pleased, so do expect the worst."

Dawn looked to Maria, who crossed herself; then Dawn studied her father's face. "Mama . . . he is not going to let me go. I know it. She isn't here, and she isn't coming, and he won't let me go."

"Hush, girl. Leave this to me," said Lady Jessica, who had just experienced the very same thought.

Don Rodrigo stopped before them, his face that of a man who had made up his mind, expected trouble because

of it, and was determined to hold up in the battle. "Come along," he said resolutely. "We are going home."

"Oh?" said Lady Jessica sweetly. "Are we? Why, my love?"

"Doña Inez has sent word that her grandchild is ill, and she will be unable to travel at this time."

"I see," said Lady Jessica. "That is very unfortunate, and I should like to visit with her and see how her grandchild goes on—"

"No," said Don Rodrigo, cutting in on her. "You are with child, and her grandson might be infectious."

"Very well," said Lady Jessica, uncharacteristically meek. "Now we must see Dawn to her cabin if we are ever to get off this boat before it disembarks."

"It is a ship, not a boat, my Jess, and well you know it. Furthermore, Dawn and Maria return to the rancho with us."

Lady Jessica drew him aside and whispered, "This trip will do her good. Meza's death . . . well . . . rumors go round at present . . . and this time away will be just the thing."

It was a good argument; Rodrigo frowned beneath the weight of it and said, "I don't want her traveling unchaperoned."

"She has Maria. That is all the chaperone she needs until she reaches England, where she will be hemmed in with my relatives. Rod, she needs to get away. She has had a shock, and besides, it would be cruel to take this away from her at the last moment."

"You are too liberal, Lady Jessica, as ever . . ." he said gravely.

WILD DAWN FEVER

She touched his lips. "It was my liberal nature that brought me on board your yacht. . . ."

Even now, after all these years, he remembered very well and could not refrain from smiling. He took her fingers away from his lips and said, "She is our daughter. I want her safe."

"As do I, but I also want her happy. She pines for England. Let her go."

It was true. Dawn was more English than Argentinian, and what she needed was to return to the country of her choice. It saddened her father to admit it to himself. He didn't want to lose her, and he sighed. "Jessica . . ."

"Come, let us take her to her cabin."

He drew himself up. "Maria," he said quietly. "I pity you, for it appears you will have no help with our brat on this trip."

An impressive British clipper sporting more canvas than a seventy-four-gun warship three times any clipper's size cut neatly through the Atlantic, China-bound. At the lookout high above the topdeck was Timmy Clark, and his eyes scanned the heavens with some concern. He was young, no more than twenty; blond, blue-eyed, lean, and hardworking. He had been at sea more than he had been on land, and this time he had a hunch they were in for a bad storm. He scrambled below, for he meant to bring his thoughts to his captain. Time, this was going to cost them time.

He didn't have far to go, for his captain was already on topdeck. He was a tall, imposing figure of a man. He stood in his dark coat, his ginger gray-laced hair of silk blowing freely round his rugged, good-looking face. His

deep blue eyes hid his quickly scudding thoughts. His thin, sensuous lips were tight. They had sailed out of New York a week ago and were making marvelous time, but the weather didn't look like it was going to continue to cooperate.

"Cap'n . . . eh, now . . . but it do look bad . . ." said Tim, coming to stand beside his lordship, Steele Norington. Tim's height was good, but his captain towered over him. "Whot now, think it might be jest a squall?"

Norington smiled and laid an ungloved hand on Tim's shoulder. "You know better. The air has been getting colder by quick degrees. The seas are higher, and damn . . . I don't like the swirl of those clouds." He shook his head. It was too early to tell, but all his senses seemed to be on the alert for dangerous weather.

"Aye . . . there be somethin' in the way the wind hauls. Do we scud, then?"

The captain shook his head. "No. First we watch." He moved forward and bellowed out orders to his crew. Damn. . . . but they were in for it. The sky, the wind, everything, made him think . . . *hurricane!*

Chapter Six

*D*awn sat up suddenly and stifled the scream that sprang to her throat. Another nightmare. Meza's violence and his death had left its mark on her. She had been at sea nearly a week, and there hadn't been a night she wasn't awakened by the memory of Meza. Explanations left her doubting herself, blaming herself, and although she had been spared from rape, still she felt violated.

However, this night all thoughts of Meza were immediately swept away upon her awakening. Something was wrong. She could hear sailors bellowing in Spanish, "Aye . . . Aye, starbowlines ahoy! Eight bells there below!"

What was it? What was going on? And then she felt the pitch of the ship. Sudden realization dawned. A storm. Well, it wouldn't be her first experience at sea in a storm. On their last voyage to England they had been attacked by what her father had described as a devil of a gale. Yes, she answered herself then, but her father had been the captain, the yacht had been their own, and the men trained by her

father. She frowned. The captain of the *Flying Cloud* spent too much time with his bottle. It had been one of her first observations. She got to her feet and reached for her clothing. She was going to have a look for herself.

Men were hard at work on the yardarms. They were soaked through, and fatigue was evident on their haggard faces. The wind fought them as they attempted to furl, but it had to be done. The rains were fierce, and the gale played with the ship as though it were a paper toy. Someone yelled at her that she was in the way and indeed she could see there was nothing she could do. She turned on the companion stairs and saw Maria with her hands clutched to her lips. Dawn went to her and put a comforting arm about the woman's plump shoulders.

"Maria . . . what is this? Do you want to frighten me? Who is the child now?"

"Sí, you are right. Maria is being silly," she mumbled, but she clutched to Dawn and closed her eyes. She couldn't stop her next words. "This storm . . . this storm will take us. . . ."

"Nonsense." Dawn laughed at once. "We will weather it as we do all things. Isn't that what you have always maintained?"

"There is a thing . . . *fate* you call it in English . . . and . . ." She sighed. "I feel it close."

"Now, what does that mean?" Dawn scoffed, for Maria was beginning to worry her. "Enough of this. Let us go to my stateroom. I will settle you there and then see if I can fetch us some tea."

Maria gave her a half smile. "Sí, that would be nice."

The next forty-eight hours saw nearly everything on deck smashed violently into splinters, including the long-

WILD DAWN FEVER

boats. Dawn and Maria busied themselves with helping the cook dry out the sailors' clothing as best they could near the stove. For a time there was a lull, but Dawn watched the storm hover, watched the captain, and knew instinctively he was not doing the wise thing. She felt it—something was wrong. Her father would not have scudded into the gale as this captain was doing. It just didn't feel right. Suddenly a swirl of wind attacked, and the ocean seemed to engulf them. She heard someone yell out that the anchor had been washed away along with all the chickens and the remaining two pigs.

Two days, Dawn thought as she watched the men do all they could to save the ship. It had been blowing for two days and still gave no sign of subsiding. The captain of the *Flying Cloud* insisted still on "running before the wind," which only served to take them deeper into the hurricane's heart. The sky was nothing but a mass of black smoky clouds filled with thunder and lightning, and Dawn, knowing something of the sea, closed her eyes and awaited the inevitable. If the captain did not get them out of the storm's center soon, they would fold into the high seas as though they had never been.

Maria came up the companion stairs to stand in front of Dawn and plead with her to come below, but Dawn would only smile and insist that she had to watch. As though, she thought ruefully, her standing guard might see them through this mess.

"Go on, Maria. Go below."

"Your mama and papa . . . their hearts will break." Maria sobbed suddenly. "For this ship . . . she will never see land . . . I know, I know."

Dawn turned to look at her fully and held her shoulders.

"Maria, what is this? Fie, dear heart. I am in your charge, remember? You should be calming me down."

Maria looked sheepish for the moment. "Always it has been the other way around." She touched Dawn's lovely cheek. "There is so much you should not miss." She was looking deep into Dawn's violet eyes, but then something past Dawn caught Maria's attention, and she gasped.

Dawn turned to see what was toward, and her breath stopped in her throat. What she saw was something she had heard about but never thought to view. It filled the sky with its solid mass, no less than twenty-five feet high. Awesome in its volume, terrifying with its threat, it hovered so that all on board the *Flying Cloud* might understand what their fate was to be.

"*Spoondrift* . . . ?" Dawn breathed in quiet terror.

It struck with the force of a shot from a cannon forming an arch over the ship. Dawn saw Maria throw up her hands and lose her balance. She reached for her, crying her name. The air was suddenly filled with salt choking them as they gasped for air, and then the spooondrift struck, lifting men clear off the deck and dropping them harshly into the sea.

Dawn was slapped back against the companion stairs and hit its wood railing with harsh impact. She was winded, bruised, and calling to Maria, who was nowhere in sight. She saw the main mast come crashing down, splitting the topdeck nearly in two and then she felt the ship picked up bodily and tossed easily onto its side. All through this she wrapped her skirts around the heavy wood railing, holding tightly, hearing her father's voice inside her head, and then she felt the tearing of lumber as the railing came away from its wall.

WILD DAWN FEVER

And then there was sea, all around her, sea, salt, and pummeling rain. Wreckage! It was her father's voice again: "Always take hold of floating wreckage. . . ." She reached out for some planking that was near enough to swim to, and she raised her upper body to its safety. What for, another voice asked; what for? Maria . . . where was Maria? She was taken by the sea, tossed between its high waves, battered by flying pieces of rendered planking. Over . . . was life over? Oh, God . . . Maria? And then, overcome with the weight of certain knowledge, her mind took pity and gave her nothing to think about while her body held tight to its refuge.

Unlike the captain of the *Flying Cloud*, his lordship, Steele Norington, pointed his ship's bows against the wind and took the force of the hurricane on the bow nearer to the storm's center. His ship, *Lightning*, was therefore shouldered away from the storm's center by the force of the storm itself.

Even so, his clipper took on some damage to the mizzenmast, and there were enough broken spars littering his deck. His men worked tirelessly as he did as well, for they had lost valuable time and been taken off course. However, the crew of the *Lightning* were not as lighthearted as they should have been, given their narrow escape. Everywhere they looked bobbed the wreckage of the *Flying Cloud*, and the quantity of planking they encountered told the unfortunate ship's story. Sympathy for their unknown fellow sailors diminished their first revelry, and a hushed solemnity took over the crew's mood.

"Damn . . ." cried Timmy sadly. "Look there." He was pointing to the torn canvas of the *Flying Cloud* as it

dipped with the ocean's now peaceful sway. "Looks like not a one came through, eh, Captain?"

Captain Steele pulled a face. The sun was full and inviting, holding no hint of what had just passed. The sea was tranquil, untroubled, and at peace with itself. There was no sign of the fury it had invoked only hours before. "Keep a watch all the same." Then as an afterthought, he added, "You know, it wasn't so very long ago when a woman was found naked and very much alive as she clung to the wreckage of the *Achille*." It was a true story and just the sort of tale needed to uplift the men's mood.

"Never say so?" Tim's light brows were up with interest.

"Aye," continued his captain with a wide grin. "A beauty I was told."

"But the *Achille*?" Tim questioned. "Whatever was she doing on board a French warship?"

"She was bride to one of the crew members and stowed away to be near him. When Nelson blew the ship out of the waters, she was thrown clear. We British rescued her, and some hours later we rescued her husband as well. So you see—" He was cut short by the sudden cry from the lookout.

The captain put up his spyglass and breathed on a hushed note. "Sweet life?"

"Whot then, Cap'n . . . whot?" Timmy demanded impatiently.

"Damn if the sea hasn't favored another female." He turned to his men and started calling out sharp orders, for there was no telling how long she had been clinging to the sodden lumber and how much longer she could be expected to hold on.



WILD DAWN FEVER

Dawn felt the spray of salt water and blinked her eyes against the brightness of the sun. She had dozed off. She tried to shift her grip but found that her fingers were fastened so tightly to the splintered wood that she was only able to do this with great difficulty. She was battered, aching, and wondering why she was holding on here in the middle of the ocean in the middle of nowhere with no one in sight. Why not just let the sea have it all? The sea had taken Maria . . . her Maria. . . .

"Oh, Mama . . ." she breathed to herself but heard her own voice, ". . . Papa, you will blame each other . . . blame yourselves . . . no good . . . this is no good. . . ."

She heard a man's voice, another and then yet another above the rest. What was this? She tried looking around, but she really couldn't lift her head. Hands . . . everywhere there seemed to be hands trying to pry her loose from the lumber she held so tight. "No . . ." she said. "Why . . . ?" she asked, thinking the sea very greedy to want her as well.

Then a voice, masculine, authoritative, the one she heard above the rest, ordered the hands away and spoke so softly, gently: "Come then, love . . . come with me . . . trust me. . . . That's a sweetheart."

Dawn sighed and let go. She was so tired. She felt herself lifted out of the water, and once again her lashes fluttered. She had the vision of a man's face above her own, and her first reaction was a positive sensation, so she smiled and knew that she was safe. With the knowledge came the release she needed and then all thoughts, all feelings and fears, were suspended.

Captain Steele's initial reaction when he brought Dawn

in was a sure and startling attraction, perhaps even admiration. She seemed so determined to hang on to life. She was a fragile being with a certain will. His men were unable to pry her hands away from the torn lumber, so he took over the task himself, bending over the lifeboat to soothe her as he worked. He held her now wrapped in a blanket, looking down at her incredibly lovely countenance, her wet black hair hanging over his arm. Her dark lashes had fluttered, and when she opened her eyes, he was mesmerized by their violet hue. She smiled softly, and had he been any other man, he might have fallen in love right there and then. But he was not any other man, and he was not susceptible to such a dangerous emotion.

Chapter Seven

*D*awn heard herself groan as she turned over in the bed. There was a general ache that seemed to immobilize her, but even so she managed to roll onto her back. She opened her eyes and found a night's darkness surrounding her. Think, she told herself. Where are you? Her eyes roamed the stateroom for something familiar and found only the moon's light through the porthole. There her eyes would soon adjust. Weak, she was so very weak. Why? Just where was she? She felt the gentle sway of the ship in motion. A ship? Was she indeed on board a ship? Had the storm been a nightmare? Was she coming out of some long illness?

Her eyes found a shape in the darkness. Someone sitting there . . . no more than an arm's length away. Someone . . . faith, oh, faith was it Maria? With a sudden joyful cry born out of hope she called, "Maria?" and then again, "Oh, Maria, I thought you were lost to me."

"No, sweetheart . . ." A firm, strangely familiar mas-

culine voice answered her. "I am sorry . . . it is not Maria." Captain Steele moved to light a nightstand candle.

Dawn blinked against the sudden onslaught of light, dim though it was. Not Maria. Her eyes scanned the stranger before her. "Who . . . who are you? Where am I?" she managed to say in a barely audible voice.

He smiled softly. "I am Captain Steele Norington, and you are on my clipper, *Lightning*."

She allowed this to sink in. "How . . . how did you find me?"

"We were both caught by the hurricane. Fortunately we skirted it, but your vessel was not so lucky. We found you clinging to floating wreckage and brought you on board two days ago."

"Two days?" She was in awe. Had she been unconscious for two days?

"Yes, this will be your second night with us." He was sitting again, watching her. "You have had a rough time of it, but your fever broke some hours ago. Would you like some tea . . . something light to eat?"

She shook her head and whispered, "Thank you . . . no, but please, do you mean to tell me I have been here that long . . . unconscious?"

"Yes, with something of a quinsy."

Again she digested all this and then asked, "Maria . . . you found no trace of . . . anyone else from the *Flying Cloud*?"

"No. I am sorry. Was that the ship you were on?" When she nodded, he proceeded, "I see. And Maria . . . was she a relative?"

"As dear as any relative, but no, she was my maid." She sighed sadly. "And more."

WILD DAWN FEVER

"And you are?" the captain questioned.

"Dawn Cesares," she answered quietly. She was so tired. She could feel her lashes drooping as she spoke.

"Dawn Cesares," he said softly as he watched her drift back to sleep. Damnation! She was beginning to absorb his thoughts just too much. What to do with her? She seemed young, too young to be sailing the seas with only a maid in attendance. What could be her station in life?

Well, she was here for the duration of the voyage to China, and then . . . ? Hell! How was he supposed to answer that when he didn't really know where she was bound in the first place? There would be time enough to consider the possibilities.

Dawn sighed in her sleep and rolled over. As she moved, the quilt slid away from her naked back. He noted the shapely contours with a sure urge in his groin. He had undressed her quickly that first day when he had put her into his bed—too quickly and with too much concern to note her feminine charms, but now? Lord, what he might do with this little pretty?

He got to his feet, bent, and took up the candle. For now there was the truckle bed he had set up in the adjoining salon, but it would be a long voyage. . . .

Dawn awoke with a sudden start. She sat bolt upright as the warm rays of the sun enveloped her. The bed quilt slid away, and she next saw that she was completely undressed. With a gasp she pulled up the quilt to her chin and sat, attempting to organize her thoughts. She was on a ship. She remembered a man talking to her last night, the captain. That's right. She had been rescued. A knock

sounded at a small door in the corner of the room, and then without waiting for an answer from her, it was opened.

Captain Steele Norington stepped through holding a covered tray, and his smile was both wide and engaging. Dawn wondered for a moment how he managed to fit through the door, he was so tall. She next found his eyes, incredibly blue and alight with certain charm, and she blushed hotly.

“Good morning, Dawn Cesares,” he said cheerfully.

She smiled in response but held back cautiously. “Good morning, sir . . .” How did she happen to be naked? Who had undressed her? This man was strangely familiar; was he the captain she had spoken to last night? Yes, she answered herself. Yes, he was.

He set the tray on the fixed nightstand. “Your breakfast, my girl.”

She was in fact very hungry but shy before him. “Thank you,” she said quietly and then, without meeting his gaze, “I . . . I think . . . we met last night, but I am quite vague about it. Everything seems such . . . a nightmare.”

“Not our meeting, I hope?” he teased to set her at her ease.

She blushed. “No, no, you have been so kind. I mean, well, how does one say thank you to the man who has saved her life? Everything, all words, seem so inadequate. . . .”

“Then we shall have to think of something else.” He couldn’t refrain from dallying just a bit, she looked so incredibly alluring, but added quickly, “In the meantime, you need to eat and gain your strength back. I will leave you to your breakfast and look in on you later.”

WILD DAWN FEVER

He started to leave, but she detained him on a meek note. "Captain?"

He turned, and his smile was sweeping. "Indeed, Miss Cesares?"

Why couldn't she keep the flush from stealing into her cheeks? Again she avoided his eyes and his smile. She picked at her quilt held high at her neck. "Are there . . . well . . . any other females on board your ship?"

The smile broadened. "No, Miss Cesares." He knew what was in her mind, what was bringing her fine dark brows together.

"Oh," she said on a hushed note. She braced herself. "Then, how . . . well . . . I . . . I . . . my clothes, sir?"

"Yes, Miss Cesares. They have been attended to as best as poor Cook knew how. Shall I lay out your gown for you?"

"No . . . no . . . I can manage . . . but . . . Captain . . . who . . . er . . . well, I suppose they had to come off?"

"Indeed, they were soaked through with salt water," he answered, enjoying himself immensely.

She brought up her eyes to his and nearly caught her breath, but with a sense of pride bracing her, she said softly, "Thank you."

He applauded her style. Another maid might have put on something of a missish show, but this one did not. In spite of her acute embarrassment she managed the moment quite well. "You are most welcome, Miss Cesares. It was my pleasure to attend you."

She looked away, for she was unable to respond, and with a chuckle he proceeded to the companionway door. He stopped there and said, "Your things are in the ward-

robe should you feel strong enough to get up today; and if you need anything, you have but to ring for help."

She repeated her thanks, and he was gone. She sat for a moment and then closed her eyes. He had undressed her? Ye gods! Such a man had seen her . . . and now what? Well, first things first. She was so hungry . . . and then she would get up and have a look about. Blue eyes gleamed in her head, and though he was the man responsible for saving her life, she felt an uneasiness she had never felt about a man before. What was this? All thoughts fled then as she found the coffee still hot and soothing and the muffins tastier than anything she had had for quite some time.

Chapter Eight

*I*t was some hours after Dawn had eaten and drifted off to sleep again when she was awakened by a gentle rapping at the small door to the adjoining stateroom dining chamber. She sat up, and, expecting the captain, pulled the covers completely around herself before she managed to find her voice. "Come in."

"Excuse me," Tim said as he opened the door a crack and kept his blushing face averted. He never raised his light blue eyes as he continued. "Cap'n had me prepare a bath fer ye, in 'ere, if ye be wantin' one, that is." He indicated the room at his back.

She found the attractive lad engaging in his shyness, and it put her at her ease. "Why, that is lovely. Please thank your captain for me."

"Aye. I'll be leaving ye to it, then, unless ye be wishful of somethin' else, that is?"

She smiled and felt almost like her old self as she answered brightly, "Yes, one other thing."

He looked at her then and felt his heart beat faster. Certes, he thought, what a beauty! No wonder the captain had been watching after her himself these two days. Any man would. "What's that, miss?" he asked in a scarcely audible voice.

She smiled at him. "Your name, sir?"

He responded to the friendliness in her manner, to the warmth of her personality, and smiled back at her. "Why, I'm Tim Clark, miss, First mate." He was proud of his station and proud of the fact that he was the captain's trusted man.

"Well, I am very pleased to meet you, Tim Clark. My name is Dawn. Dawn Cesares."

"Aye." He couldn't say why, maybe it was her overwhelming prettiness, but he thought it was more, for he found he liked her. She was quality. He could tell by her voice, by the inflection of her words. He started for the door to the companionway. "Ye'll not be bothered in t'other room. It's cap'n's quarters, and no one will interrupt ye there."

"Thank you." Then she halted him as he opened the door. "I hope I'll see you later . . . ?"

He grinned. "It will make us all that happy to see you feeling fit enough to come up, then, miss, so, aye, I hope I'll be seeing ye later."

Dawn sighed happily after he left. She felt as though her world were once again balancing out. Taking her quilt with her, she moved to the wardrobe cabinet, and there, neatly folded, were her articles of clothing side-by-side with the captain's things. Her gown had taken quite a beating, but it was the only one left to her—all other things were gone—and then she thought once more of Maria.

WILD DAWN FEVER

* * *

On topdeck the crew was enjoying a warm sun and some lively spirits. Captain Steele looked on indulgently from his post. He was wise enough to understand that men at sea for any length of time need a certain measure of recreation.

One of the newest members of the crew was a surly lad of uncertain age. His elders had decided he was no more than sixteen and in need of manners. The boy made the mistake of sassing the crew's never-before-challenged social leader, Mr. Hall, and one and all gathered round to see how the large Mr. Hall would respond.

"Eh, now," cried the lad as Mr. Hall took him up by his shirt collar. "Leave go . . . eh!"

"Ye be a weak-minded milksop!" answered Mr. Hall. "And in need of a lesson."

"Whot? Is it ye, *old man*, that means to give it to me, then?" sneered the boy, who had just managed to wiggle out of Mr. Hall's stranglehold.

Mr. Hall's large round face took on a strange expression, but his mouth curved wide. "Aye." At the boy's back was the cook's steep tub full with the cook's mixture of slush and seawater. So, grunting, he proceeded to pick the boy up bodily, and with the aid of his confederates the boy was heartily dunked in the slop.

A round of unmerciful laughter took place as the boy choked on the dirty water and gasped for air. Tim Clark shook his head and started forward to put a halt to the proceedings. Something, however, caught his attention, and he turned. Perhaps it was the flutter of her rose-colored gown or the eye-catching vision of waist-length, curly black hair blowing in the sea breeze. He only knew

that he couldn't move as he turned and found the full vision of Dawn Cesares emerging from the companion stairs.

"Uh . . ." he started, and then met her smile. "Miss, it's that good it is to see you topside. Why, you *are* a sight you are."

She laughed and inclined her head. "I hope you mean that as a compliment, sir?" She was teasing him and laughed all the more as he blushed and grew flustered.

"Why, whot else could any man with eyes mean?"

She looked toward the rollicking crew, some of whom had noticed her and were in turn going silent to be caught in such a fetch with a lady present. "What's toward, Tim Clark?" she inquired of him.

"Oh, that." He grinned. "The men jest be 'avin' a bit of sport."

Suddenly Dawn felt rather than saw him. There was an electricity in the air. There was something in the way Tim moved, looked, bobbed a space backward, that made Dawn look up. There was no denying the magnetism of the man. His uncovered ginger-hued hair blew freely in the wind. His bright blue eyes flashed with something she could not name. His smile charmed as it was meant to, and she found herself putting her ungloved hand into his as he bowed.

"Miss Cesares. What a pleasure it is to have you topdeck with us." Without further preamble he had her arm linked through his, and as he silently dismissed Tim he moved off toward the bulwarks with her.

She wasn't quite sure, but she suddenly felt as though he were manipulating her, taking too much upon himself. However, she told herself she was just overly sensitive,

WILD DAWN FEVER

overly wary, because of her recent experiences. After all, what was he doing but drawing her over for some private conversation, and wasn't that just what she wanted?

"Captain?" she began, and then hesitated.

"Yes, Miss Cesares?" he encouraged.

"It seems to me we have been sailing south . . . south-east, in fact, and I don't quite understand," she offered cautiously.

"Yes, Miss Cesares . . . that we are," he answered easily.

She blanched. Where was their direction? It had never really entered her mind that they might not be going to England. After all, it was an English clipper, an English crew, and an English captain.

"Yes?" she returned. "What do you mean, yes? I . . . I would think England would be north from where we now are. . . ?"

"Indeed. England is; however, our direction is not England."

She closed her eyes for just a moment and thought of her parents. They would think she had drowned. They would get the news of the *Flying Cloud* having been lost at sea, and they would think she was dead. "Where . . ." she asked on a breath that was scarcely audible, "where are we headed?"

"Why, to Canton . . ." and then because he saw the confusion on her face, "China, Miss Cesares."

"China!" This was a squeal of dismay. "Aren't we going to England? We must be going to England, sir?"

"Of course we shall, girl . . . eventually," he reassured her.

"Eventually?" She shook her head. "This can't be

happening." All she could think of was her father and then her mother, both mourning her loss. They would hear of the *Flying Cloud's* destruction, and if she were not in England to get word to them. . . . She looked up to find the captain frowning at her distress and nearly stamped her foot in vexation. She had never before been so thwarted, so helpless. "How long . . . when do you expect to . . . arrive in China?"

"With any good luck, in about eighty-four days," he replied.

"What?" This was a genuine shriek of horror, for he might as well have put a gun to her head.

"Well, yes. We are trying to beat the record of ninety-five days fourteen hours, you see—"

"Beat the record?" she repeated distractedly. "What do I care for that?" And then because she knew she was being rude, she amended, "Oh, please do excuse me, but . . . this is intolerable!"

His answer was frosty. "Is it, Miss Cesares?" Here was a spoiled woman, indeed, he thought. What the devil was the matter with her? She should be thankful to be alive!

She was taken aback by his lack of understanding, by her own confusion and distress. "Yes, yes, it is," she said, and turned on her heel.

He had a vision of long, curly black hair, of a shapely back, as he watched her run in the direction of the companion stairs. He frowned and started after her, catching her upper arm just inside the companion stairwell. "Miss Cesares . . ." he started.

She yanked out of his hold and turned her dark violet eyes to his face. She was not one to cry easily, and she did not now. Perhaps if she had, she would have drawn on his

sympathy. Instead her eyes blazed, her chin went up regally, and she immediately incited his own resolute temper. "Yes, Captain?"

"Rest . . ." he said on a hard note, " . . . might improve your manners."

She nearly had a convulsion, and this time she did stamp her foot at him. Unable to trust herself to words, feeling too many of them splutter at her lips, she rushed away and took the steps at a dangerous pace. She missed the last step and went flying; however, Timmy Clark was fortunately on hand to catch her.

He smiled easily, blushed, and set her upright as he could see his captain at the top of the stairs, watching and looking dangerously out of sorts.

"Easy, miss," he said lightly.

"Thank you, sir. You . . . unlike *others*"—she flung over her shoulder—"are a gentleman."

There didn't seem to be a safe answer to this, and as she then left him, he was spared the necessity of one. He smiled ruefully up at his captain, who grimaced and called him to order on topdeck. He sighed. He didn't know what had transpired, but this was hardly the type of beginning that boded well.

Chapter Nine

Dinner was an ordeal of polite conversation while the captain's steward served in awkward silence. This was due to the dunking he had received early that day and the fact that he was unused to waiting on females. There was a moment's humor when the captain teased him about his experience, but it was quickly followed by silence again.

The coffee was served at last, and Dawn was praying for the moment she might escape when the captain pushed back his chair and dismissed the steward. Her first thought was that they were *alone*. It hit her squarely and extinguished all logical reasoning. This because, despite the captain's coolness and his obvious disdain, she felt an odd attraction for the man. She was all too aware of his good looks and his male magnetism. She was feeling missish and shy beneath the stare of his cool, deep blue eyes. She felt inexperienced before his obvious self-assurance and sophistication. She was annoyed with herself for her behavior, yet unable to retract because she was irritated by his lack of understanding of her situation.

WILD DAWN FEVER

He rose from the dining table and moved to a wall cabinet. She watched as he poured himself a snifter of brandy. He started to turn in her direction, so she dived into her coffee cup and lowered her gaze. He laughed, and she looked up at him suspiciously.

"It is an interesting pattern."

"Pardon?" She was wide-eyed, and he was all too aware of the depth of violet color in her large eyes.

"The table cover, Miss Cesares," he said glibly.

She eyed him sharply. He was poking fun at her, and her chin went up. "Captain?" She changed the subject without preamble. "Won't you reconsider?"

"About what, Miss Cesares?" He was a devil; he knew exactly what she was asking.

"About this trip to Canton. I simply must get to England . . . immediately," she answered on an exasperated note.

Her tone angered him. Who the hell did she think she was? "No," he answered easily.

"I don't understand you!" she returned crisply. "Can't you see, it is impossible for me to make a . . . a . . . three-month journey with you on this clipper, and then God knows how much longer before we arrive in England."

"I suppose you will have to make the best of it," he answered without emotion.

She got up and started pacing. Her hands clasped and unclasped. "Again, you don't understand. My family, they will think I drowned."

He softened. "We shall send word from Canton."

"That is absurd. You don't even know when a ship will leave for Buenos Aires from China!"

He lost patience, and his tone hardened. "I am sorry for

it, but, as I have said, you will have to make the best of it. At least you did survive the *Flying Cloud*."

She was struck hard by this, for her first thought was of Maria, her poor Maria. She blanched and turned away from him. He was touched by the helplessness of her movement and went to her. His hand softly found her shoulder and turned her round to face him. "All will work out in the end," he said gently.

He was not about to explain his position to this little spoiled hellcat; besides, she still would not have understood. It was obvious to him that all that mattered to her were her own needs.

"Yes, of course," she responded bitterly. "For you."

Her lips were sweetly red and pouting, and it occurred to him that here was a woman who needed training. He took her into his arms then, encircling her within his hold before she knew what he was about, and his mouth discovered that hers was sweet and all too tempting.

She couldn't believe what was happening. She was shocked, she was frightened, but she was also conscious of a certain excitement that struck her blood. His mouth parted her lips, and she found his tongue asking for hers. She pushed against his chest, but it was a useless effort. His kiss blossomed into another as he bent her body against his own and then suddenly released her.

She was breathless but still managed, "How . . . how dare you?"

He grinned. "Like this, madam . . ." and started to reach for her once again.

She jumped out of his way and ran to the next room. However, as she closed the adjoining door, she looked

behind her and saw the large bed. Faith, she thought, what if he comes in here—and just what does he mean to do?

An interminable length of time elapsed, during which Dawn suffered an agony of doubt. She just didn't know what she should do. She was fatigued from the exertion of her first day up, yet she knew she couldn't sleep. She sat upright, stiff and tense as she watched the door to the adjoining stateroom. She marveled that he made no attempt to enter. He was arrogant. He was not like Meza who used violence to attempt to take what he wanted, but he had used a sure force—hadn't he? It was all so confusing. Had she tempted him to that kiss? Had she allowed him that liberty? No, she answered herself, no.

What to do? Well, he wasn't coming, and there was a certain relief in that. She wasn't able to face him just now. She got to her feet and moved to his cabinet of books. It was not locked, and she opened the glass case, where she found a beautiful volume of Tennyson's latest book, *Poems*. In it she discovered "Locksley Hall" and took it to the bed, where she found a comfortable position and started reading. However, words seemed to melt into one another and lost their meaning as she attempted to read. She gave it up and went to her companionway door. She would go topside and have a walk on deck. After all, it was ridiculous to allow him to frighten her off.

It was, of course, a mistake. No sooner had she found herself in the refreshing night air than she realized she had no outerwear to protect her from the wind, and it was cold. She stood for a moment leaning against the bulwarks and hugging herself. She was freezing and feeling the fool

because she could see him just out of the corner of her eye. He was standing at the helm, and she knew he was looking at her. If she left now, he would think she had come up in search of his attention.

Help came suddenly and unexpectedly as Tim Clark draped his heavy, dark wool sailor's coat round her shoulders.

"There, miss. We don't want you back in bed so soon after you left it, now, do we?"

His smile was kind, and she appreciated it. She beamed her thanks. "Oh, no. I couldn't take this from you."

"Aw, oi don't need it oi don't; oi'm jest—"

"Mr. Clark!" said a strong, stern voice at their backs. "Don't you have work to do?"

Tim Clark smiled sheepishly and started off. "Aye . . ."

"Tim," Dawn called after him, and stretched out her hand, which now held his coat. "You'll need this."

"Keep it, miss."

She went right up to him and put it in his arms. "I'm going below. Please don't fuss." She turned and found the captain glaring.

"I'll thank you, Miss Cesares, to leave the lad be."

She fired up. "He was only offering me his coat,—as any gentleman would do."

"He needs it more than you. He is working this rig. Now, didn't you say you were going below?"

In something of a huff she turned on her heel and strode off. He stood and watched her swing her hips and smiled to himself. It occurred to him that this was a chit with a wild temper all her own and his best course would be to stay clear of her.

* * *

Staying clear of Dawn Cesares was a chore he found harder than he had anticipated. Oh, not that *she* put herself in his way. Quite the opposite, in fact. She had only to see him coming in her direction, and she would take another. She managed to make friends with nearly each and every crew member, until they had only to see her to grin in merry anticipation. Cook, jolly, aged, and sympathetic to her cause, was the first to fall under her spell. She would sit with him in the galley and ramble on while he prepared the daily menu. It was thus she was able to avoid the captain even at meals, taking hers as she dawdled with Cook in the galley.

Timmy Clark was the second to own himself devoted to Dawn. He had only to bask in the sunniness of her smile to feel himself in heaven. Theirs was a friendship that came easily because of a sure compatibility in their natures. His only confusion was wrought because of her open hostility toward the captain he adored; added to that was the captain's very odd reaction to Dawn. Timmy found himself continually caught between the two and unsure how to behave.

During this time the captain's temper became ruffled, and his ego underwent a certain "pinking." Why the devil did she avoid him? Who in thunder did she think she was, talking to his crew as though she had known them all for years? Why didn't she talk to him? How easily she laughed with Tim, yet whenever he came within hearing, she would fall silent. Why? What, just what, did she find repugnant about him? And this galled him. She wasn't even dining with him. Yes, he had wanted to stay clear of her. Yes, it was just as well that she apparently felt the same, and still, he cursed the situation.

It was a clear, crisp morning, and she was taking a brisk walk on deck, getting her exercise, as she habitually did. She wore an old dark wool coat that was far too large for her (one that Cook had managed to find and repair for her use) and beneath it a white shirt and dark blue pantaloons that had been bestowed upon her by Tim. The captain eyed her ruefully, for she was, even in the loose-fitting garments, an alluring figure. Her long black hair fell in cascading curls to her waist. Black brows were in delicate flight over dark lashes. Violet eyes were lush with deep color, and her mouth touched his senses, inspired his imagination, until he found himself walking toward her.

Dawn was hugging herself against the cold as she looked out to sea and wondered for the hundredth time how she could get word to her parents about her well-being. The thought that they would be told she was dead was devastating. Something, perhaps a movement, perhaps instinct, made her turn, and she saw the captain coming purposefully toward her. Faith! What could he want? They had scarcely spoken in the last few days. It struck her as it was wont to do that he was an incredibly good-looking man. His uncovered hair of ginger waves blew round his lean, handsome face. His deep blue eyes were full with an expression she could not understand. His lips were set in a determined line, and she felt a certain thrill at his approach. Something within herself said "Run" but still, she remained where she stood and waited.

He felt his senses come alive as he drew nearer to her. Her violet eyes were full with wariness and something else, something that stirred his blood. "Good morning, Miss Cesares," he said, and inclined his head.

WILD DAWN FEVER

"It is, isn't it," she said simply, and turned back to the contemplation of the ocean.

"It would have been a better one if you had taken your breakfast with me at my table."

"For whom?" She turned and smiled sweetly at him. "I am not accustomed to the treatment you dole out to your dinner guests."

He laughed, remembering their last encounter. "Shall I promise you that I won't try to kiss you? Would that win me your company at meals?"

She eyed him cautiously and cocked her pretty head. "And what is that, pray? A promise from a stranger who has already displayed himself untrustworthy is an idle thing."

Again he was able to laugh. "Ah, it is just as well, for I didn't mean to give such a promise. In the end, I think it would have annoyed you considerably."

"Do you?" Her hands went to her hips, and her violet eyes blazed. "Well, you are wrong. All I want, Captain Steele, is for you to allow me to find passage home . . . or to England. There must be somewhere closer than Canton, China, that you could take me? If it is the money, my family would reimburse you any expense incurred on my behalf—"

He interrupted her. "It is not the money, child. Try to understand. I am sailing my clipper to Canton for a purpose. It may seem insignificant to your self-centered little mind, but—"

She cut him off. "Self-centered!" She nearly exploded with her irritation. "You are a boor! A cad and . . . and a . . . a . . ." For lack of adequate words to describe what she thought him, she turned and fled.

He was moved to anger and followed her, catching up just as she was about to shut her stateroom door in his face. He stayed it with his open palm. "Hold a moment, girl!" He pushed the door open and kicked it closed after he had stepped through. She stepped backward and away from him, some fear mingling with the rage displayed in her eyes. He was taken up with her loveliness, moved to some passion by her reckless temper. "You will control any further outbursts from here on. I am captain of this vessel, and, as such, exact a certain behavior from my men. You will *not* undermine my authority by speaking to me in such terms in their presence. Understood?"

"I would not have been pushed to do so, Captain, if you had not seen fit to treat me as though I were a child in need of training!"

"That, my girl, is precisely what you are." So saying, he turned and slammed out of the stateroom and made his way topside. His men had heard the shouting, if not the exact wording, and kept their distance in silence.

Timmy Clark studied his captain for a moment in passing and raised a brow to a fellow seaman to keep silent. Their captain was in no mood for fooling this morning.

Chapter Ten

*D*awn was sprawled out on her bed, her faded rose-colored gown spread around her supple body, a quill poised over paper and a sigh on her lips. She looked up at the porthole, at the descending darkness, and then at her flickering candlelight. Faith! He would be coming to his room soon—coming to dine. She should be out of here and below with Cook before she bumped into him. Hurriedly she put away her writing material and got to her feet. She blew out the candle and moved to the companionway door. There she peeped out into the dim corridor and found it clear.

Quickly she picked her way down the hall to another set of stairs that led to the galley and Cook. There she found the older man busy at work, and she smiled. “Hmmm. Smells delicious.” She reached for a biscuit.

He uncharacteristically frowned and slapped her hand away. “Don’t be doing that, child!”

Her eyes opened wide. “Cookie, just one?”

"Aye, if ye go and 'ave it in Captain's quarters, sitting at the Captain's table loike the lady ye be."

"What is this?" She was surprised and a touch wary.

Cook didn't look at her but applied himself to the task of stirring his pot of gravy. "Never mind back talking to me. Fact is, ye shouldn't be taking yer dinner in the galley, and well ye knows it. Captain, he says 'ow ye been losing weight and looking peekit and 'ow it ain't the thing fer ye to be taking yer meals loike ye were no more than a common seaman." He nodded his halfhearted condonement of this. "And whot's more, Captain be right. Aye. Ye be Miss Cesares . . . and—"

"And I wish to eat here, while I chat with you," said she, regally, and then added, "And I do not look poorly!"

"Aw, now, little girl, give over do and 'ave dinner wit himself. Ye've been on board now more 'n ten days, and oi'm thinkin' if ye can make the loikes of an ole grump sech as me smile, well, then, ye can do the same fer the captain."

"I don't want to make the captain smile," she returned pugnaciously.

"Don't ye, then?" he said hardheartedly. "Well, child, it's off wi' ye."

She stood for a long moment in complete indecision before finally turning around and heading back for her cabin. This was intolerable. How dare he do such a thing? She went and found the long looking glass and stared at herself. She had lost some weight. Yes, perhaps she hadn't been eating right. But then a knock at her small door made her jump.

The captain didn't wait for an invitation but opened the door wide and stood at its threshold. His ginger locks were

WILD DAWN FEVER

highlighted by the candlelight at his back, and his face was drawn in stern lines. His deep blue eyes did not smile, but his voice was soft and certainly pleasant. "Miss Cesares, dinner will be served in my cabin." He stepped aside. "Please, do join me."

"Do you always command your guests, Captain?" Her chin was up.

"When they are on my ship," he answered simply, but his voice dared her to challenge him.

She turned away. "I find that I am not hungry this evening. Thank you."

He was in his former bedroom in a thrice, the door to the adjoining room slammed at his back, and his hand had her arm as he spun her around to face him. "I have had just about enough, little girl! You have been rude and ill-mannered long enough. You will take your dinner, and you will do so at my dining table." He let go her arm and stood firm. "Now, do I carry you to my table, or do you manage the distance like a gently bred maid?"

"You are insufferable," she breathed, but took a step forward and away from him as she moved to the door indicated. "I will dine with you because you give me no choice, but I take leave to tell you that I would rather dine with the devil himself!"

"Perhaps, my girl, that is precisely what you *are* doing!" he said on a hard note. He stood and watched her swing her hips away, and a slow smile curved his lips.

He did not make it easy for her. Dinner was an ordeal of formal, stilted conversation. She made no effort, and he did nothing to charm her mood away. Instead he took the trouble to provoke her until her violet eyes flashed and she nearly pounded the table. She was answering one of these

idle provocations, her lovely eyes glaring, when he laughed suddenly. "Easy, love, so much heat? I am only teasing," he said, and this time there was a certain warmth in his deep blue eyes.

She sat back unmollified and refused to look at him. He pushed the coffee he had just poured to her and said, "Go on, you wanted coffee. I promise you peace for the moment."

She eyed him doubtfully as she took the cup. She had hardly eaten during the course of their meal together, for she had felt awkward and ill at ease. She sipped the hot dark brew and avoided his inquiring eye. He sipped his brandy and proceeded to gaze at her in his open fashion.

"I suppose your missish air is due to the fact that you are unused to male company." He baited so well.

She fired up. " 'Missish air'? I am sorry you have such an opinion, though I don't really give a fig for what you think, but my dearest friend was a male, and I was wont to roam in his company all the time."

He laughed. "Oh, yes? And who was this beau? A brother?" he taunted purposely.

She put down her coffee. She was caught up in his web, and her temper was such that she couldn't see the fibers.

"Miguel . . ." She stopped and calmed herself. "No, Miguel is not my brother. I very nearly married him."

"And why didn't you?"

"That is none of your business," she clipped off. She got to her feet abruptly, and he followed suit. She had to get away quickly. "Thank you for dinner. May I, Captain, be excused now?"

"No," he said quietly, and took her into his arms. Damn, but she felt good, so good, to touch. Had a woman

WILD DAWN FEVER

ever felt quite like this before? Yes, yes, of course. He was at sea; of course he wanted her—what normal man would not?

Why was she letting him do this? It didn't make sense. She felt his firm, strong arms wrap around her body; she felt his hands move to hold her buttocks, and she couldn't believe that she wasn't trying to break away. It was his kiss. She was stirred by his kiss. His mouth had enfolded hers, parted her lips gently with the hint of his tongue, and then pressed for her response. She couldn't, wouldn't give him her tongue, but he searched it out in her mouth and played havoc with her senses. Her hands were on his shoulders, but she wasn't pushing. She knew she was holding on to him, wanting more of him as she felt the hardness of his manhood through his knit breeches.

Deftly he wielded her untried desires. Skillfully his hands caressed her into sensations she had never before experienced. Purposely he didn't take it too far. Suddenly he released her and stepped back. There was a smirk on his face, and it was his first mistake.

She saw his expression, and all but one sensation flew—anger! Her hand went round for the slap, but he caught her by the wrist and chuckled. "You don't want to do that because I would return it."

"Cad!" she breathed, but just barely.

"Why, because I took what you wanted to give? No, I think not, at least no more cad . . . than you wished me to be." There was amusement in his deep blue eyes, and it further inflamed her anger.

"Arrogant as well," she said, her chin well up now. "You imagine what is not there."

"Did I imagine your response, little one? Aren't you honest enough to admit you responded?"

She stared at him, wrath flashing in her violet eyes, but there was a problem. She couldn't answer him. Not now. She wasn't sure what was truth anymore. Had she wanted him to kiss her? And if so, why?

He laughed at her silence and said softly, "There now. Go on. Go hide in the other room, in . . . *my* bed, if you wish."

"If I have to hide, sir, it is because I am not safe with you in private," she answered frostily.

"Oh, you are safe with me. I have no need of girlish airs." It was said with a touch of disdain, enough to ignite her to frenzy.

"'Girlish airs'?" she stormed. "You take unfair advantage of me, and you dare to—"

He cut her off, his hand waving off her statement with total contempt. "Sweetheart, I took no advantage you did not allow."

She stomped her foot out of exasperation beyond her control. "I did not allow you a thing!"

"Didn't you?" He moved toward her. "I could prove otherwise here and now."

"Stay away from me." She stepped backward.

He laughed. "Don't you trust yourself?"

"It is you I don't trust," she snapped.

"Child, you are out of tune with your needs," he said softly, and again he had her waist.

This time she struggled with a fury, but it got her nowhere. He had her in a steel grip and would only laugh.

"You can't get away if I don't wish you to."

"You . . . you are insufferable!"

"So you keep telling me," he said softly. He had her twisted round so that her back was pressed up against his hard, lean chest and his mouth was near her delicate ear. "Ah, sweetheart, don't fight me." Again suddenly he released her.

It was difficult dealing with him. She didn't know what to expect. He didn't play by the rules; he seemed to have a set all his own.

"Fight you?" she nearly hissed. "You give me no choice!"

"That's right," he responded at once. "And that is something you would do well to remember." He was not in the least put out by her indignation.

"I . . . I will *never*, never, do you hear, have dinner with you again!"

He hardened, and his deep blue eyes glistened with his sense of authority. "Oh? You will not only dine with me in the evening, my girl, but we will breakfast together as well."

"No. I prefer Cook's company," she tried jabbing at him.

"Oh, really. Well, that is fair enough, but you will have to put up with my company in his stead."

There was something in the way he said the words that gave her pause. She hadn't thought that she might be getting Cook or any of the other seamen into trouble with their captain. This was a new worry. She couldn't deal with this anymore. She rounded on her heel and left him, closing their adjoining door with something of a royal bang. This situation was more than she could handle. She had never been so abused or mistreated. She had never had anyone take her by storm, and that was what this wild Captain Steele was trying to do. How, dear faith, would she manage the next two months more with him?

Chapter Eleven

*T*he morning light streamed through the porthole, and Dawn stared at it from her bed. She held the quilt to her chin, and there was a certain determination in her eye. She wasn't going to have breakfast with Captain Steele. Not she! Who did he think he was? Well, she would show him that she couldn't be ordered about like one of his seamen. She had been awake for hours. She had washed with the clean warm water the steward had supplied some moments ago, and she had come to her decision. Ha! What could he do? She would simply tell the steward when he knocked that she was too ill this morning to eat. Then later she would get up, and feeling more the thing, she would go topside. What could he do?

A knock sounded on her door, and she felt herself tremble. "Y . . . es?" she responded uneasily.

"S'cuse me, ma'am . . ." It was the steward. "Cap'n says ye are to join 'im at his table."

"Tell the captain I am not feeling quite up to breakfast this morning. Thank you."

WILD DAWN FEVER

There was a pause on the other side of the door. It was the adjoining door to the captain's dining quarters—the quarters he was now using as a bedroom as well. She strained to hear, but though she heard the captain's low masculine voice, she couldn't hear what was said.

Her violet eyes opened wide to find him suddenly in the doorway, a tray in hand. He kicked the door shut at his back after dismissing his steward, and strode toward Dawn's bed, his smile very pronounced. "Good morning, sweetheart," he said jovially, and plopped the tray down on the bed.

She pulled the covers round tighter, sitting bolt upright and with cheeks flushed. "What do you think you are doing?"

"Why, I am serving your breakfast . . . in bed, as you would not take it at the table," he said evenly.

"I don't want it!" she returned petulantly. "I . . . I am not feeling quite well."

"Oh? Aren't you, love?" He shook his head and then, as if remembering something wonderful, offered, "I have just the thing for you. Wait here. You'll swallow this and—"

She cut him off. "No. I am not going to swallow anything!"

"Oh, but I promise you, my girl, you are." It was said with a sure threat in his voice.

She eyed him. Best perhaps to humor this beast so he would leave her be. "If you insist . . ." She moved to pour the pot of coffee. He allowed it, watching her all the while.

He was enjoying himself immensely. She handled herself in an intriguing fashion; she had a temper, yet she did

not pick up the tray and fling it at him as some temperamental females might have done. She had her pride, yet she saw the wisdom of giving in when she could do no other thing gracefully, and that was it: she managed even in her anger to handle herself with a certain style. She needed training, and he rather thought he was the man for the job, not that he wanted it, but he could amuse himself.

She handed him a cup and took up her own, avoiding his eye while she sipped the hot brew. He took up a biscuit and remarked upon its freshness before taking a large bite and then pushing it into her mouth.

She was taken aback—there she was with this long biscuit stuck between her lips. The only viable solution was to bite a piece off and attempt not to choke on it. His blue eyes were lighted brightly with his amusement.

Polite conversation. She would show him up and make polite conversation. “You don’t eat very much for breakfast. My father always manages to put away three or four eggs.” She smiled sweetly and sipped again at her coffee.

“Does he? I find that when I am in residence I can do the same,” he answered, but there was a frown on his face. Did she think him old enough to be compared to her father? It was disturbing.

He reintroduced the subject of her family out of idle curiosity. “Do you have any brothers? Sisters?”

“A brother. He is ten and quite a little man.” She smiled, fondly recalling, and then a sigh escaped. Would they tell him she was dead? Oh, God, how awful.

“How is it you were traveling without your family?”

She answered him easily before it occurred to her that this was really none of his business. “My parents weren’t able to accompany me, and the woman who was to travel

with me couldn't at the last minute. It was necessary for me to go to England. . . ." She thought of Maria, and her voice trailed off.

"Why necessary? Are you being married off to an Englishman?" It was said half-teasingly.

Her chin went up. "My parents would not marry me off, as you so crudely put it, and no, marriage was not my purpose in returning to England." Something cautioned her to avoid mentioning her inheritance. "I have family in England. My mother is Lady Jessica Stafford and . . . there were personal reasons for my journey at this time."

"Lady Jessica Stafford?" He sounded surprised. "I am acquainted with the Staffords. Some of their lands border on my New Forest estate." He looked at her thoughtfully. Here now was something, indeed.

She put down her cup as a sign of dismissal but added, lest he not take the hint, "I thank you for bringing me breakfast. It was most thoughtful of you."

He grinned. He would not be outmaneuvered. "Yes, I thought so. You are feeling much more the thing now, aren't you? Good. Why don't you get dressed and join me on deck." He got to his feet.

She now saw she had quite an adversary. Again he had managed her. Again he had led her exactly where he wanted. Well, she wasn't going to cut off her own nose. On deck was where she wanted to be. She smiled.

"Till later then, Captain."

"Oh, not too much later," he warned, tempting her temper on purpose, "or I shall find myself forced to come and fetch you. The sun and warm salt air will be good for you."

"And you would, of course, carry me topside willy-

nilly. Oh, I have no doubt of that," she answered ruefully. "Therefore, I suppose I must do as I am bade until such time as I can find a way to do as I wish." Still the innocent look pervaded her face, but there was a militant look in her eyes.

He laughed and flicked her nose. "Don't fight me, love, and we shall deal famously."

"Supposing, of course, that I *wish* to deal with you, Captain."

He laughed out loud, took up the tray, and left her through the companionway door. She was quite a handful, but one he was certain he could manage.

The captain was busy at the helm, and though Dawn stole some looks in his direction (she told herself, better to study and know the man), he was too occupied to continue his morning's flirtation. However, there was enough to catch her interest. Cook came topside with a load of fish he had just cleaned from the morning's catch, and he set out the ingredients for pickling, explaining to Dawn as he went along.

She wrinkled her nose over the brew and informed him that she rather thought they would taste better smoked. This they argued over for a time until she noticed that his attention had been caught by the sea. "What?" she asked at once. She knew the signs. Her father had often looked to the sea with just such a look, and too often it had preceded a storm. Another storm? She dreaded the thought. "What is it, Cookie?" She repeated the question when he would not answer.

"Naught."

"Then, why are you looking at the sea?" She eyed the skies which were gray but not overly threatening.

"Never ye mind, lass. We've the best there is as captain of this 'ere clipper, so there be naught to worry ye."

"You and the crew admire him a lot, don't you?" she inquired curiously.

"Aye."

"Why is that?"

"Aw, now, lass, ye told me yer own dad was captain of his ship. Ye should know the signs of a great shipmaster."

She glanced to Captain Steele busy at his work, busy at everything all at once. "You tell me, though. I want to know what you and the men think makes a worthy captain."

"Well, now . . ." He stopped to scratch his broad chin. "A shipmaster that works on deck after dark and relies on nobody but himself to carry canvas . . . aye, that be a sure sign."

"I see . . . but what of the man . . . aside from his skill as a captain?"

"He be a man's man. You either like him, lass . . . or ye don't. Most do," he said simply.

Timmy Clark came upon them at that moment and remarked, "It's a *horse market*, it is."

"Aye," said the cook on a sour note, and his eyes flickered in Dawn's direction. However, it was too late—the term had already caught her attention.

"A *what*?" Violet eyes were wide.

"Don't ye be knowing what that is, girl?" The two had developed an easy friendship not unmixed with a great deal of teasing.

"And why should I?"

"Well, now . . . seein' as ye said ye were bred to the sea?" His eyebrows were up tauntingly.

"Timmy Clark!" Her hands were on her hips, but her violet eyes twinkled. "Tell me what it means."

"If ye promise not to worry me about it," he answered, putting on airs.

"Worry you? You are beginning to worry me," she returned on a startled note.

"Right, then. It jest means rough seas—naught more, so don't be making a to-do."

"A storm? Is it a storm coming?" She was frightened, and it showed in her eyes and the sudden unsteadiness of her voice.

Timmy Clark forgot himself in the rush to comfort her and put an assuaging arm about her delicate shoulders.

"Whot's this? *You* afraid of a little rough weather?"

She looked up into his eyes. "Is that what you are telling me we are in for?"

"Wisht now!"—this from Cook—"Have done, Tim, for stap me if ye 'aven't gone and scared the lass."

A strong male voice, so different from all the rest, and with the power to make her jump and Tim withdraw his arm, bellowed, "Haven't you work, Mr. Clark?"

Tim's one brow went up, and off he went. Cook studied his pickled fish, and Captain Steele took hold of Dawn's upper arm and steered her to the bulwarks. "Now, Miss Cesares, will you tell me why you had my first mate's arm around you?"

"What? Oh . . . he . . . I . . . oh, Captain . . . are we in for a storm?"

He was taken aback. "A storm? Why do you think so?"

"Well . . . Tim said it was a 'horse market,' and I

WILD DAWN FEVER

asked him to explain what it means, and he said it is rough seas and . . . and then you came."

Captain Steele understood all at once and smiled. "Mr. Clark did not fully explain the term." He pointed at the breakers. "Look there. See how the waves all rise in a heap . . . see how they meet?"

"Y-yes?"

"That is a *horse market*, that type of sea. It doesn't always mean a storm, and I am rather certain it does not mean one now."

"Why?"

"Just a feeling."

"Which you have for the sea?" she pursued. There was something so very exciting about being near him. She was frightened by the sensation and drawn closer to him all at once. Confusion took over her mind, but she didn't want the moment to end. She really didn't want him to leave her at this moment. She wanted him to go on talking so she could look at his face, study his style, try and understand him.

"Which I have for the sea"—he looked at her long now—"and other things as well."

"Such as?"

He laughed and flicked her nose. "Asked in innocence, so I shall answer in honesty. Horses. After the sea I love horses."

"So do I." It was said with longing. All she could think of at that moment was her black horse beneath her, of taking him across the pampas of her home, of seeing her father's lands and all their familiar surroundings. It made her wistful; it deepened her despondency and made her thoroughly homesick.

His fingertips brushed her cheek in some understanding, and their eyes locked in an embrace that set her to trembling. There wasn't time for him to do anything about this, for one of his crewmen approached, and Captain Steele stepped forward to have conversation with the man. Dawn watched him as he talked to his sailor and felt a certain stirring of heart and blood. All at once she knew, all at once she admitted her attraction for him to herself. This was not good. He was not the sort of man to form a lasting attachment. He was not someone she should attach herself to; of a certainty it would cause her pain. Quietly, unobtrusively, she slipped away and hurried to her cabin.

She stood at her doorway's threshold and knew she was going to cry. She felt an overwhelming sense of loss. There was no one here who really understood. All that she held dear was in another world out of her reach, and the one being in her new world was just as out of reach! And then he was there at her back.

She felt his arms go around her as though it were the most natural thing. She felt his lips at her ear, gently kissing, sweetly caressing, soothing away her loneliness, her fears. There was a constriction in her throat. She couldn't speak, and she didn't want to cry in front of him. Somehow they moved into the room, and the door closed at their backs. She felt herself drift into a haze, for her vision was blurred with unshed tears. He turned her in his arms and held her close, his voice soft, tender with concern: "Never mind, child . . . the feeling will pass." It was a whisper, and his deep blue eyes touched her with sincerity, with caring.

She dived into his arms and cried into his lean, hard chest. Sobs she had held back for too long escaped, for

Maria was indeed gone, Argentina was not within her grasp, and China was a foreign place she wanted nothing to do with. She was lost and alone, and he was suddenly an anchor. Gone was all logical thought. The room was a blur, and there was only the two of them touching, and he was so strong, so good to hold on to. He assuaged her with hushed endearments, with quiet promises for the future: "Hush, sweetheart . . . in no time at all, England will be yours, and this will be forgotten. I promise. Hush, dear heart . . ." He stroked her long black hair, kissed her forehead, her nose, her eyes.

She found his voice soft, compelling. She needed him, and when his lips moved from her eyes to her mouth, it was a welcomed act. As he kissed her gently he felt the need to soothe her ripen into something altogether different. It had not been his intention to take her to this point, but suddenly he felt himself out of control.

Dawn found his affection something she needed. She moved to his stroking, molded herself to his body. It seemed a natural thing that his kiss had found its way to her lips, a very natural thing.

That her lips parted was perhaps unfortunate, for it teased his own into further action. That she did not pull away but instead moved her hands to his shoulders was perhaps to steady herself, but it enjoined yet another kiss, and this time, though still gently given, it was not in the spirit of kindness! Captain Steele felt a surge urging in his loins as her body pressed against his own, and he had no thought of stopping in the face of purer intentions. He damned his conscience, for he had been wanting Dawn from the moment he had first looked into her eyes. His tongue found its way into her mouth and teased her own as

his hand made its way to her breast, caressing, fondling, taunting her into wanting more.

That he had managed her this far spurred him on, and he wielded the buttons at the back of her worn gown with swift dexterity. The gown came away from her firm, supple body, and he groaned with pleasure and anticipation. The sound of his desire excited her beyond her imagination. Thoughts were banished, and logic was a thing unheard of as her sensations took her into unexplored regions. She discovered a need in her to please him as she responded to his kisses, to his touch, and, oh, how he touched.

His mouth nibbled along the outline of her throat, lower to her naked breasts. He took hold of them, whispering his delight in her beauty, before he played with the pert nipples and teased her into frenzy. He bent his head and suckled there, and Dawn knew she could no longer stand on her feet. She felt herself collapse, buckling, but he was there, taking her to the bed, throwing off the gown, which still clung about her hips. His own clothing he worked with one free hand as his mouth returned to hers, as his tongue dived hungrily and played with her senses. He had his jacket off, then his shirt, and he was undoing his breeches, working first one boot off against the bed and then the other.

Dawn felt the hardness of him and recoiled in sudden fright as he placed himself between her slender legs. He felt her stiffen and soothed her with magic words: "Softly now, babe; you feel so good . . ." He took her hand and lowered it to his pulsating rod, and she nearly jerked it away, but he held her hand, rounding her fingers into place. ". . . That's a sweetheart . . ." he whispered se-

WILD DAWN FEVER

ductively as he manipulated her and then brought up her hand to his lips.

He groaned with pleasure as his mouth traveled the length of her body, as his hands held her hips, as his knee parted her thighs, and once more he was kissing her cherry lips, pushing gently at the apex of her legs, and arousing her to heights of fever. She moaned softly, and then his fingers teased her womb, entering in slow degree as he suckled at her breast. It was an onslaught of passion, swift, tender, and all-consuming. He was an experienced man, gentle in spite of desire, skillful with his hands, his voice, his body.

She was an innocent, she was vulnerable, she was overpowered by her attraction for him, and she was at an age when she was more than ready for the moment. Somewhere in her mind she heard herself screaming for a halt. Somewhere, too far away, she heard herself asking, demanding a stop to the insanity. What was she doing? She wasn't even in love with him . . . was she? How could she be? Why was she allowing him this when she had allowed it to no other? What was wrong with her? And then he was gently working his way into her, driving her into fever pitch. As he tore away at her virginity she felt a rending that tore a scream of pain from her, but he was already stroking her hair, kissing her eyes, assuaging her. "Hush, babe, it will get better. . . ." He eased himself inside of her until he felt her relax again, and then he worked, rotating with some control lest he hurt her more. He groaned his pleasure, told her of her beauty, urged her to join in his dance, and felt her respond. He felt himself near climax and held back as he brought her first to hers. She arched as he brought her to fever peak, and she said his

name. It was like a small heat explosion deep inside of her, and then she felt him quickly withdraw himself, shooting his seed onto the linens of the bed.

He sighed softly, and as he lay down beside her, his arm held her close and within his fold. There was a confusion of emotions touching his mind, but he wasn't going to deal with that now. Now there was only this woman-child with the fine body beside him. All else he would deal with later. He kissed her forehead as she snuggled up against him, and then he closed his eyes.

Dawn hid her face against him and didn't dare breathe. What had she done? Faith! What would her parents do if they knew? Mercy! What was she going to do now? She was in the arms of this . . . stranger. She had been moved by passion, naught else. Like a common doxy she had given herself out of wedlock. It went against everything she believed. It broke all the rules—rules she held to be truth. What now? She wanted to pull her clothes on and escape the room, run from him, from the sensations he aroused. She started to slip away from him; she was reaching for her gown, her mind flitting to the moment he had started to undress her, when his voice, soft, appealing, and yet so very much in command, halted her. "Oh, no, my lovely . . ." His chuckle was low, and his grasp was firm as he found her waist and drew her to him.

"Let me go. I . . . we . . . I shouldn't be here like this. . . ." She felt herself blushing hotly. Words seemed to choke in her throat.

"Then, how should we be?" It was provocatively said as he pulled her on top of him and kissed her mouth lightly.

He was amazed at how thoroughly she ignited his de-

WILD DAWN FEVER

sire. He felt his manhood harden into readiness, and his voice went low, seductive. "Ah, babe . . ." was all he said before his mouth closed on hers with serious intent.

Again she asked herself to think, and again all she did was give over to the wondrous sensation of his touch. "Steele . . ." Softly she made the attempt. "This is wrong. . . ."

He touched her breast gently, then fingered the nipple into pertness, and his smile was curved with self-assurance. "Not wrong; it is too good to be anything but right. . . ." He was already taking her hand now, wrapping it around his throbbing shaft, teaching her how to use it. He watched as she closed her violet eyes; he watched the expression on her face, and it thrilled him. He looked at her long black hair, how it curled over her shoulders and swayed at her slender waist, before he brought her to him hard, almost defiantly. "Ah, sweetheart, give it to me . . ." he said hungrily as he worked her well.

Chapter Twelve

*D*awn awoke with a start. The stateroom was clothed in darkness. There wasn't even the hint of moonlight at the porthole. Timidly she turned over to peer through the darkness for the captain, but he wasn't beside her. With some surprise she sat up, pulling the covers round herself. What happened? Why did she feel as though none of this were real? Because it wasn't. It hadn't really happened . . . but it had. Steele had been with her.

She covered her eyes. Faith! What had she done? And with whom? A man she didn't even really know. How could she have given herself so freely? What would he think? Oh, no. What would Timmy think? The men would know that the two of them had been out of sight and would make their own assumptions. She felt herself blushing, and then a light streamed through from the captain's adjoining room as he opened the door and stuck his head in.

"Awake, pet?" He didn't wait for an answer, for he could see her sitting ramrod-straight in the bed and under-

stood her confusion. "I've had a tub drawn for you in here. You'll feel more the thing after a hot bath, I promise you, and then we'll have dinner." Again he didn't wait for her reply but quickly closed the door and made his way topside.

Here was a dilemma. His crew had eyed him some hours earlier when he had first made his appearance after his time with Dawn. They had eyed him and then exchanged knowing glances among themselves. Steele was fully aware of it and unsure about how he meant to handle it. Dawn Cesares was a gently bred maid. She had been a virgin, and he wanted to shield her from embarrassment. He must have his men treat her with respect, but more, he would have them think of her with respect. Had he looked a little deeper, he would have realized that all his crew, to the last man, felt deeply sorry for the girl in question. In their eyes she was an innocent who never stood a chance against a man like Captain Steele.

It wasn't until he came face-to-face with his favorite, Timmy Clark, that his fears in this regard were put to rest. Timmy knew that his captain was the very devil with women and had in the past taken a certain measure of pride in this fact. However, he had hoped that his little Dawn would prove immune to his captain's charms. Watching her had him puzzled. There were times when she wouldn't even look in the captain's direction, and then there were times when he could not help but notice the electric flow between Dawn and Steele. He almost blamed himself. He had sensed her depression this morning. He had sensed her need to be comforted, but he had been leery of the captain's watchful eye. If he had gone to her, perhaps . . . but that was neither here nor there.

He nearly collided with his captain, who was in excellent spirits, unable to keep the smile off his handsome face, and Timmy almost growled. He did, in fact, pull a face. Steele was surprised and stopped him. "What's this, Timmy, lad?"

"Oi dunno what ye mean, Cap'n," Timmy replied gruffly.

"Don't you?" Steele wasn't about to let it rest. He could see a general look of disapproval on the youth's countenance, and it was not like Tim to find fault with him.

"Well, 'tis none of my affair," answered Tim almost primly.

"What isn't?" the Captain pursued relentlessly.

The afternoon had been a trying one, and Tim could contain himself no longer, though he still did not meet his captain's eye. "It ain't loike ye to be playing fast and loose wi' an innocent, and Dawn be naught else." There, he had said it!

The captain was pleased with this, but he would not allow anyone, even his favorite, to fault him. "So she is, but what I do with her is my business."

"Aye . . . and hers." Tim was defiant, and on this last he did meet his captain's eye.

"And is *her* business any of yours?" Steele was purposely being cruel, but his sudden possessiveness about Dawn put him at this point.

"Aye," answered Tim, not yet ready to back down. "Oi gave her m'friendship, oi did, and oi don't want to see the girl 'urt. Do ye, Captain?"

"Tim, I thought once you trusted me. Do you think I will hurt her?"

"There's the rub, Cap'n. Oi didn't think ye would bring her to this pass, so whot then?" He sighed heavily over the problem.

"I've had a hot tub prepared for her in my quarters; therefore I will not want dinner served for yet another hour. Please see to it that Cook understands." Thus he had dismissed the lad and the subject, and he was not displeased.

Dawn soaped herself and put her head back against the wooden tub. She ached sorely, and the hot water was certainly soothing. She wanted to just float away and find herself at home in the safe arms of her parents, but no, how could she face her parents now? Well, at least she would not find herself with child. It was one of the first things he had explained to her afterward. He had said in such a cool voice that he had withdrawn each time before releasing his seed. She had wanted to die of embarrassment, but he had only laughed and taken another kiss.

Well, then, what was she now? She could never marry anyone . . . she was a fallen woman. How odd that was. She didn't feel like a trölllop, yet she must be. She had been soaking for a long time and knew she had to get up and face the music. Tim . . . how could she ever look Timmy in the eye and feel normal again? Buck up, girl. You chose your road. She got up and reached for the linen with which to dry herself when the companion door opened, and he stood there. She was transfixed by his presence, by what his presence had the power to do to her. He quickly closed the door at his back and went toward her, his smile wide on his face, his blue eyes glinting appreciatively. It occurred to him that even after hours with her, he still was not satiated.

She covered herself hurriedly and he laughed. "So shy, my sweet?" He had reached her and had chosen to lift her out of the tub, cradlelike, and carry her to the coal-burning stove, where he allowed her to stand as he helped dry her off.

"I can do that myself," she said quietly as his hand explored more than it dried.

"So you can, but I can do it so much better." He grinned.

She spun round to look at him, wide-eyed as his meaning found its way to her brain. "You are disgusting!" she snapped.

"Am I?" he teased. "Let me show you just how much—"

She dived out of his reach. "Leave me be, Captain Steele!"

"Ah, I was forgetting your virgin soreness. Are you very achy, sweetheart?"

She looked away. "Leave me alone. I don't know why . . . I don't know how I happened to . . . to . . . but it won't happen again. I want you to leave me alone. If I never see you again, it would be too soon."

This irked him, and he answered without thinking, "I have reason to believe otherwise, my dear." He started for the door. "Our dinner will be served shortly. I have left you a dressing gown in *our* bedroom. Do make use of it, as your gown will need some work before you don it again."

She blushed deeply and looked away from him, but her voice was low, angry. "It seems that for the time I am on your ship, I am very much at your mercy. It will *not* always be so."

WILD DAWN FEVER

"More's the pity!" he answered irritably. "For what you need, woman, is training!" With that, he left the room.

She wanted to hurl something at his head. She wanted to scream with frustration. She stomped around for a bit and then sat to make her plans. Oh, but if only she could make him fall in love with her and then vanish. . . .

If only she could? Why couldn't she? She could learn to please him, couldn't she? She could yield to his "training," be everything he had ever dreamed a woman should be, and then when she knew she had won even a small piece of his heart, she would leave him without a word! Devil take the beast; that was precisely what she was going to do!

Chapter Thirteen

C*ertes, what a lovely day, thought Dawn as she stretched* to meet the rays of sunlight streaming across her bed. She studied the brightness filling her room for a moment and then remembered. Ah, a new day, a new woman. Woman. That is what I am, she thought, a woman. She saw blue eyes twinkling and closed her own. At least she had convinced him to leave her be last night. In meek tones she had explained that he should continue to sleep in the truckle bed he had set up in his dining room if only to keep up appearances. He had agreed, reluctantly, but he had agreed. Dinner conversation had been spent in soft tones of light teasing. How he had teased, and how she had blushed. It was hard, so hard, to institute her plan to make him fall in love with her when it was he who was in command of every situation, and he was. Then he had tried to take her into his arms, and she had backed away and begged him to leave her to her rest.

His brow had gone up, but she had made him realize

that she was sore still from their lovemaking in the afternoon. He had laughed boyishly and agreed to give her the night off if she would take a turn with him topside. She had looked down at his brocade dressing gown, which was all she wore, and then peeped up at him, saying she had no clothes. He had laughed again and brought forth his large, dark greatcoat, draping it around her shoulders. "There, my pet . . ." He had taken her hand and pulled her along. His pet! How that annoyed her. That was how he saw her, but she contained her irritation and played his game. His pet, eh? Well, and so she would be . . . for a time. And she was. She looked up at the stars, she listened raptly as he spoke, she admired openly as he took over the helm, and then demurely she left him to his men and the night.

Their adjoining door opened, and he stepped forth. His ginger hair was windswept. The sun glinted brightly on his rugged, handsome face, displaying his ruddy complexion to advantage. His blue eyes were deep with color and roguishly captivating. He wore a dark blue sailor's coat, and over his arm there was a length of dark red material. He brought this to the bed and dropped it at her bent knees. "I've found you this silk in the stores—perhaps you might be able to make use of it? Are you any good with a needle and thread?"

She reached for the silk with some enthusiasm, her violet eyes bright with anticipation. "The wonder is that I am, for my mother is not. I learned the knack from . . . Maria." Her voice faded on this last, but he was already taking up her attention.

Some of the quilt had fallen away from her as she fingered the red silk, and her naked shoulders were exposed to his view. He smiled, and his hand went to her

chin, lifting her face to receive a kiss. Her lips parted beneath the pressure, because of the magic of his touch, and because it aroused her more than the gentle affection he had only intended.

"Are you sore still, my girl?" he whispered, and his hand had already gone to cup her naked breast.

"Don't you have a schedule to meet? I am told the best captains are the ones who are most often seen topside" was all she would answer.

He laughed merrily and released her. "Just so." he started for the companion door.

She halted him briefly with a quiet "Steele . . . ?"

"Yes, sweetheart?" He was all smiles.

"Thank you," she said sweetly.

He inclined his head, pleased with himself and with her. "You are very welcome," with which he was gone.

The moment had been easily won, she thought; no doubt his intentions had been to put her aside to go to his helm. Now, time to wash, dress, and see to the cutting of a pattern!

Later that day and dressed in sailor whites with one of the captain's heavy dark blue sailor coats on, Dawn went topside. She found there an awkward moment when she came upon two crew members, who stopped their conversation completely to tip their hats at her before resuming their work. However, the awkwardness was dispelled a moment later when Timmy appeared out of nowhere and made a disparaging remark about her silk shoes. They were, in fact, salt-stained and roughly worn, and Dawn had often thanked Providence that their lacings had kept them on during her ordeal in the sea. They had once been

WILD DAWN FEVER

a soft rose color but had turned into something quite bedraggled and faded.

"Now 'ere be a dandy!" teased Timmy, winking at her. "Since ye 'ave me whites, shouldn't ye be wearing m'boots, girl?"

She pointed her toes for a moment, contemplating them with a laugh. "Aye, for your boots would do me better, I am sure." She sighed. "At least, my new gown should put them in the shade."

"What new gown?" He eyed her doubtfully. "Oi'd swear we hadn't any women's clothing on board. . . ."

"No, you don't, more's the pity, but the captain found me a length of red silk, and I've already cut a pattern out of some old burlap I found in Cook's stores; so, you see, I mean to set a fashion on your *Lightning*."

"Ah, girl, you would do that in rags, you would." He reached out sympathetically and touched her hand with his own.

She met his look and understood that he still meant to stand her friend, and she smiled warmly. "Thank you, sir."

Captain Steele watched the two with a sense of irritation. It was absurd, but if he didn't know better, he might think he was even feeling a touch of jealousy, possessiveness. Impossible. He hadn't felt that way over a woman since he was a boy!

"Mr. Clark," he said not unkindly, "take the helm. I've got to go below for a bit."

Timmy winked at her and was gone. Her violet eyes rose to meet her captain's blue ones, and she nearly sucked in breath. He had the power to make her tremble like a

schoolgirl. She lowered her eyes in severe contemplation of the polished deck.

She was beautiful—everything about her, from her flowing black curls to the tip of her toes. Every move she made was enchanting; every expression was captivating. He went forward and asked softly, "Have you had enough fresh air? Would you like to join me below and help me with my charts?"

Fear of his power over her made her want to say no, but the need, the all-consuming need to study him further, prompted her otherwise. "Yes, I think I would like that. I used to help my father with his charts."

There, again, she was comparing him to her father. He was only thirty-three years old—no more than ten, maybe thirteen, years her senior. Did she see him as old? The annoyance flickered away as he took up her hand, small, soft, and trembling in his. "Come on, then, and perhaps we can beat the record I set for myself. The faster we arrive in Canton, the faster you will be home."

Oddly enough, the days glided swiftly by for Dawn, and more often than not she found herself happily humming and unconsciously smiling. Quickly she managed to put the red silk together, and a few days after that she had it completed. She managed her time between reading on or below deck, working with Cookie in the galley, or at light jobs Timmy would find for her. All the while she studied Captain Steele.

Sometimes hours would go by and the captain would never even look her way, and then suddenly for no apparent reason he would invest a degree of attention in her. He seemed a contradiction of every man she had ever known.

WILD DAWN FEVER

He seemed a contradiction of himself—one moment setting up a rule and then the next arrogantly breaking it.

A week went by, and because she indicated a certain reluctance to allow him her bed, he stayed away. Then suddenly he went out of his way to charm, entice, and seduce, but it was her time of the month, and she begged off. Dawn found it a thing extremely difficult to do, because she discovered she wanted him, missed his touch, his kiss, and was thoroughly ashamed of herself over this.

During these two weeks, however, she made an effort to flirt demurely, enchant his senses, display herself playfully, and win, if not his heart, his admiration and attention. She was not dealing with a schoolboy, however, and the games she knew were not up to his measure.

Captain Steele was aware of her confusion, aware of the snares she was attempting to design for his captivation, and all too aware that she was not immune to his charms. He wanted her, of that he had no doubt, and added to this was his supreme self-assurance that when he decided it was time to have her again, he would. Thus, he allowed her that first week. If she meant to tease by putting him off, so be it. He would make her ask for it. There was time enough to accomplish his plans. He passed that first week purposely avoiding any intimate contact and flirting as lightly as she herself did. However, as the second week came to a close, he began to want her more than he had anticipated, more than he wanted her to ask for it. He began dallying with her at every opportunity; he began teasing her into temper, teasing her into blushes, teasing her intimately with slow seduction in mind, but nature intruded and put a temporary halt to his design.

It was now the third week after he had taken her to bed, and he was nearly out of control. She had a way of sauntering past in her red silk gown that made his blood start flowing urgently. She had a trick with her violet eyes that set his mind to racing, and she had an infectious laugh that always caught his interest and turned his head.

There she was now, sitting at Timmy's knee, sewing a length of sail, laughing with the lad and inviting him to inspect her handiwork. He frowned at them from where he stood and continued to work the helm. Those two! They were always jesting, laughing, touching each other like . . . like, no, not like lovers! It wasn't the lad who had won her virginity, and by *thunder*, he meant to remind her of that tonight!

Chapter Fourteen

*D*awn was taken aback at the start of the evening, for it was the first time in more than two weeks that Steele had not joined her for dinner. Instead he had his young steward serve her alone and in *her* room! She couldn't believe it. He had made such a ceremony these past weeks of observing the amenities at dinner, of forcing her to accept that he meant her to be at his table and not in Cook's galley, that she was puzzled to understand this latest move. That it was a ploy, a game, a strategy, she had no doubt, for she didn't believe the excuses he sent. Busy at the helm? When he had spent a good part of the day there? No, not likely.

It flickered through her mind as she slowly ate her dinner that she missed him. It wasn't just the company that she missed, but *his* company. Had the room been filled with lively people, still she would have looked for his face. Odd that, for he was forever exasperating her with some outrageous statement. Yet she knew he brought

her senses, all her senses, to life, and she knew he had captivated her attention.

She picked up the gothic novel she had found among his collection of rare volumes. Well, it would be pleasant to sit alone and read for a change. Yes, and it would be relaxing not having to duel with him at every tick of the clock. Yes, but why was he staying away? Was he tired of her company? Could it be that she irritated him? All these nights she had thought he was amused and enjoying their lively banter, but perhaps she had been wrong? Perhaps he was bored? No doubt he thought she was missish. Faith, what a dolorous thought that was. Here she was trying to charm him, and all she had succeeded in doing was turning him away. Her mood dived further downward.

On deck the captain was in high spirits. He toured his vessel, exchanged jests with his men, ruffled Timmy's thick head of hair, and thought of nothing but Dawn! By now she had finished her meal. By now she was wondering why he hadn't joined her, for he had given a lame excuse purposely. She would be too clever to believe it, and she would wonder what she had done wrong. Poor girl, he thought. She didn't really stand a chance in this game they played. He was older, wiser, more experienced in these things, and he meant to train her to respond to his every need. More than that he hadn't thought out.

He unbuttoned his heavy dark blue coat as he took the companion stairs to what used to be his bedroom, to what he intended to be again this night, and without knocking he opened the door, saying, "Hallo . . . all done?"

He saw the steward hovering over Dawn at that point and laughing over some minor remark, and frowned. The

steward caught his expression and eyed his captain, who then silently dismissed him. He waited for the boy to leave and again applied himself to be gracious. "It would appear that none of my lads are immune to your charms." His gaze swept over her thoughtfully, for she was dressed in his brocade dressing gown, which, though revealing nothing, gave the imagination a tickle.

She smiled sweetly, ready to play his game. "Are you hungry, Captain? There is so much here still that I can't eat. . . . Shall I set you a dish?"

He shook his head and began to pull off his coat, unbutton his waistcoat, undo the buttons of his wide-sleeved shirt. He did this with a masculine grace that captivated her attention. "No, thank you, love. Cook made certain I had something to eat on deck. I would like some brandy. If you would pour me a snifter while I get out of my boots . . . ?"

"Of course," she said softly, and went to the sideboard, where he kept a decanter of the French brew. She turned and found him naked to the waist and felt the blood rush to her cheeks. She couldn't move forward but stood like a fool holding the glass out toward him.

He laughed to see the color in her face. "Now, what is this? You have seen more of me on an occasion I remember very well and . . ." He had reached her, and taking the snifter of the dark libation, he felt her hands trembling. "What is this? You aren't frightened of me, child?" There was deep concern written on his face, and indeed the notion irritated him.

"Not of you . . ." she answered honestly, ". . . but of what you make me feel." She couldn't meet his gaze.

He held her chin and forced her violet eyes to look into

his blue. "And what do I make you feel?" It was an intense question.

She couldn't answer him in words, so up she went on her toes, and, dazed at her own audacity, she held his shoulders and gently brushed her lips against his. It was all that was needed. Her light kiss sparked his already burning embers into a hot flame. His arms went around her as his mouth took hers boldly. Dawn felt herself melt against his body, and she gave herself to his kiss. She felt her knees wobble, and a certain urgent tingle between her legs demanding satisfaction. She responded to the call by pressing herself to him more intimately, and she felt the hardness of him against her thigh. He groaned with sure desire and said her name as he undid the dressing gown. Gently, carefully, he eased it away from her naked form, all the while still holding her with one firm arm. His kisses traveled down her neck, and then he was on his knees, holding her breasts, teasing the nipples into pertness, suckling there while he took and directed her hand.

She loved the feel of him. His touch sent shivers of pleasure through her limbs, and as he suckled at her breast she felt herself climax. She folded, collapsing onto her knees, joining him on the floor as he undid his breeches and guided her hand within to find and hold his staff. She was spurred by the thrill of him as she released it from confinement. She felt a frenzy of desire she couldn't believe she was capable of experiencing. Again he was saying her name, whispering magic words of encouragement, prompting her to further passion.

What was she doing? Such a question had no place in that moment. She found herself putting his beautiful rod to her lips, caressing its length with her kisses, teasing it with

her tongue. Desire rushed through her and called a halt to all girlish shyness. This was the forbidden act her friends had all whispered about, giggled over, set down as repulsive. Yet here she was, willing—nay, hungrily loving his manhood, taking it to her breasts, and then suckling it.

He moaned. "Ah, sweetheart . . . that feels so good. . . ." He held her head in his large hands as her mouth worked him at first timidly, and then, at the sound of his pleasure, with more conviction. "Babe, ah, babe . . . not yet, I don't want to go off just yet. . . ." He was taking her up to her feet, picking her up, cradlelike, into his arms, and carrying her to the bed. Here was the ardor he had seen in her beautiful violet eyes; here was the passion he knew she was capable of feeling. He wanted her more than he had ever wanted any woman before, and he didn't want to frighten her, so he contained himself.

She looked up at his face, deep into his blue eyes, and knew in a moment what she was feeling. Here was the man of her dreams, the man she had been waiting for, but he didn't feel the same way . . . yet. She held to him tightly as he kissed her, as his tongue teased and met her own, as he placed himself for his thrust, and she found herself murmuring his name as he lunged deep inside. She arched to meet his dance, and his hands went to her rump, squeezing, manipulating her pleasure points, rotating her hips, teaching her how to receive him. He moved with her boldly, again whispering intimate things. "Ah, baby, give it to me . . . now . . ."

She felt herself peak, and still he held back, wanting more of her, pulling her round now to sit upright on him. His hand went up and played with her breasts, moved to hold her hips, her belly, as he manipulated the cadence of

their dance, and then he felt her climaxing again, and with his head back he released his own passion, groaning pleasurably all the while.

He didn't let her go, but still within her, he brought her down on his chest and held her tightly, kissing her forehead, her eyes, her nose. "You are good, sweetheart. . . . Every part of you is so good. . . ."

She buried her face in his chest and suddenly wanted to cry. Everything she had ever dreamed love and marriage might be was clouded over. She had given herself out of wedlock to a man who would never make her his own . . . at least not in name. How could she bear it? How could she bear not having him?

He was still hot for her. He had been spent from their lovemaking just a moment ago, but already he wanted her again. He felt his staff begin to harden as he lowered his head to her full breasts, suckling there as his hands worked her legs, as his fingers teased the opening of her womb. "What . . . what are you doing?" she was surprised into asking.

"Ah, sweetheart, you tell me," he said as he pulled her on top of him again, and then in a softer, seductive whisper, "*You* tell me."

Chapter Fifteen

*T*here was a warm sea breeze blowing as Dawn stretched and leaned back on her palms to better view Captain Steele at his helm. She sat there in the pile of canvas sail she was repairing and marveled silently over his looks, the width of his shoulders, the manner in which he stood, strong, self-assured, in command. She loved the way his ginger hair, lightly laced with gray, blew round his face and the way his deep blue eyes twinkled. Stop! Over and over again, she would tell herself to stop. She was forgetting her objective, which was to make him fall in love with her, *not* to fall deeper in love with him.

His glance found her. She was like a kitten, playful, sweet, and in many ways quite innocent. He liked having her about, watching her at her chores. He liked hearing the sound of her laughter when she joked with his men. Her long black hair blew round her neck, and she pushed it away with a motion of her hand, a motion peculiar to herself, and he smiled. He could see the pertness of her

nipples pushing at the silk material of her red gown, and he had a sudden urge to touch. She met his glance and blushed to find him appraising her. "What is that?" he called softly. "Color in your cheeks? Why?" He was teasing her.

"You know why," she returned saucily.

"No, no, I don't. Come over here and tell me." He was grinning now.

Unquestioningly she went to his side and stood close, and he spoke to her in a low, intimate voice. "So, why are you blushing, sweetheart?"

She couldn't answer him but blushed an even deeper shade of red, and he laughed, though his hand came between them, and his forefinger and thumb found her nipple. Gently, provocatively, he drew on its sensitivity until she cried in a low whisper, "Steele . . . not here . . ."

"Then, where?" He was playing with her, but he was becoming all too aroused. "For if I have to keep watching you, my girl, it has to be . . . and soon."

She could see Timmy in the distance and knew he would soon be able to have himself a good look, so she jumped merrily away from him. "Then, my lord captain, don't watch me!" So saying, she left him and giggled as she scurried off to go and talk with Timmy.

He looked after her for a moment before returning his attention to his helm. She was a lively little piece, and there was no denying that he had a strong attraction for her, but she was a Stafford and therefore dangerous. He had better maintain some distance in public or else find himself the groom in a shotgun wedding. This brought a frown to his face. He was, in fact, disturbed over his behavior. It wasn't his style to seduce innocents. As of late

he had not even taken his usual precautions against making her pregnant. He would have to make an exerted effort to control himself. He couldn't get her with child. . . .

Again he thought of Canton, China. Time had elapsed so quickly. There was something about Dawn's presence on his vessel that made the days flow swiftly by. The sooner they arrived in China, the better. He wasn't about to let her get under his skin. Women had their place, and this one could be trouble. He meant to make certain she was safely out of his reach. He would see her on another ship bound for London. He would finance her wardrobe, her journey, and even find her a lady's maid, but he would not spend another two months with her on board his *Lightning*. Damn, there would be the very devil to pay if he were so unwise as to do that. As pleasant as it might prove to keep her with him that much longer, it was not possible.

Think about it, he told himself. Think about the dust it would raise with her English relatives, high sticklers every one. There they would be, pulling into Southampton harbor, Dawn innocently by his side, blushing for all the Staffords to see! Hell and fire, that would scandalize them, and he would find the noose of marriage neatly tied round his neck. Marriage? The word struck terror into his heart, disgust into his mind. He was not about to be trapped. He heard her giggle and unconsciously looked her way. The child had a certain charm that was most captivating, but it was time to say good-bye, as he was wont to do with all his mistresses. The fact that she had been a virgin gave him a twinge of guilt, but after all, she had been willing. . . .

Dawn had been giggling over something Timmy had said, but as the lad turned to exchange a bantering remark

with a fellow crew member, she looked round and gazed at her captain. He was so remarkably handsome standing in his shirt sleeves, the wind playing with his gray-laced ginger hair. How attractively it fell across his forehead. How blue his eyes were. How wide his shoulders. . . .

She couldn't believe that in another week they would actually arrive in China. Had all that time elapsed already? All she had was another week and then, though it would break her heart, she must run away to the English embassy and arrange passage to London. She could not, would not, sail for London with Captain Steele as his mistress. He would feel trapped if she did such an unwise thing, and if he felt trapped, he would not be able to feel anything else.

She would leave him a note at the appropriate moment and . . . and if he did not seek her out in England, perhaps her heart would break, but she would survive. He had taken her body and taught it to respond as a woman. She had held back her soul and taught it to retain its individuality. She would have to be clever about this, though. She guessed that he intended to hand her over to a packet ship bound for London. There were things he hinted at, things he actually said, that made her aware of his intentions. Thus, she would have to beat him at his own game. He would not like that. It would stick in his belly that she had run away from him, so that was what she had to do, successfully! Well, China, here we come. . . .

It was late. A full moon encased their bed in a brilliant glow. Dawn's back was snuggled up close to Steele's strong, hard body. He held her pressed against him, his breath on the back of her neck, her gleaming black hair thrown up and away over the discarded pillow. Their

lovemaking had taken him into pleasure realms never before explored. Even with his vast experience and variety he found Dawn in his arms far more exciting and satisfying than any woman he had ever known.

Canton was but a few days away. Canton meant more now than just beating the American record. It meant the end of an idyllic interlude. The thought of that prompted him to speak, though all he wanted to do was just hold her.

"Dawn?" Softly he said her name, and it was a caress.

"Hmmm?" She knew he meant to drop another hint. His hints had been coming hard and fast these last two days. She had been pretending not to understand his meanings; hence, he kept them coming.

It occurred to him fleetingly that she was so gentle, pliable with him. He quoted Shakespeare, perhaps to soften the blow: "'Her voice, ever soft, gentle, and low—an excellent thing in woman.'"

She smiled to herself. He could be so charming. "Ah," she answered ruefully, "what canst thou want now?"

He flicked her nose. "Rude child. But I was thinking about you, about what you want . . . have been wanting, since I fished you out of the sea."

"Oh?" Here it comes, she thought, and time was she allowed him the moment.

"No doubt you will want to depart for England as soon as we arrive in Canton," he said gently.

There! Blatant at last and to the point. She would have to maintain supreme control even though her poor heart was aching. Dealing from instinct, she answered, "Oh—oh, yes, but you said this morning you would be at least two weeks loading supplies and trade."

"Precisely; however, there is bound to be a merchant ship returning to England sooner than I . . ." His voice faded.

Silence. Purposely she said nothing and allowed *his* words to hang between them, always to be remembered, and then slowly, "Yes, of course." Then after a pause and on a very quiet note, "I shall miss you, Steele." She admitted this to him freely because it was truth, but there, too, she wanted him to see how very brave she could be.

He was impressed. He had expected, at the very least, some tears. He kissed her ear. "Ah, pet, I shall never sail my *Lightning* again without thinking of you."

His words cut unmercifully. She wouldn't show him how deeply she was wounded; after all, he had said just what she had expected him to say. She answered him quietly. "And I shall fondly remember you as my *first* love."

He was relieved to have the business settled so amicably. Relief showed on his face, but something inside of him balked at her behavior. Something inside of him felt irritated, and it was not an easy matter to allow the subject to drop where it stood. Not easy, but he managed the feat.

Her heart ached, and her pain formed a constriction in her throat. She wished she were home with her black, riding him across the pampas, jumping the highest of the fences, laughing with Miguel. She had turned her face, and she had seen his relief clearly, and oh, oh, how it hurt. She maintained her control, but deep in her violet eyes anyone who knew her well could see the sadness. Well, look at him, she told herself almost bitterly, but not quite. He feels he has brushed through a sticky situation, doesn't he? Fine. So he has, but perhaps he doesn't realize just

WILD DAWN FEVER

how strongly he has come to feel about you. With this hope she teased her rump against him and won an instant response. Oh, yes, my Captain Steele, you will remember well!

Chapter Sixteen

*D*awn stood on deck in her worn old rose-colored gown, one of Steele's dark blue coats slung over her shoulders and her hand held tightly in his as he directed his vessel toward Canton harbor.

It was fascinating to watch the melon-shaped Chinese barges sail by. Steele advised her that they were carrying chests laden with tea and were taking them to the merchant ships ten miles downstream at Whampoa.

She oohed and ahed as they passed a nine-story pagoda surrounded by anchored ocean-going ships receiving cargo. She opened her violet eyes wide to see a flower-gilded boat with painted female faces at its window and innocently inquired where such a vessel was bound. Steele laughed out loud and answered glibly, "To hell, my sweet, as most of us are."

"No, truly . . . why are there only girls on that boat . . . and did you see how they flirted when we passed . . . ?" The suspicion crossed her mind that this was a

floating brothel, and was confirmed when he answered, "Why do you think, kitten?" He grinned wide.

She blushed and said "Oh," but as there were so many different kinds of vessels to appraise and remark upon, her attention was soon diverted.

He released her hand as activity increased and his attention was required by his crew. She stood back and watched them all managing their vessel with style and dexterity through the busy river, and then the Canton wall came into view. Her lovely mouth dropped open, for she had never seen its like. It stood twenty-five feet high and was no less than twenty feet wide, running for six miles around the city. Steele had told her about it, but seeing it now was a picture that would stay in her mind forever. The labor that must have gone into the building of such a massive structure was incredible.

Steele had given her a brief description of Canton life, telling her that foreign women were not allowed within its walls. There was a city beneath the Canton wall created by foreign merchants. It was referred to as the Factory, and it was here that non-Chinese lived. She had also managed to find out that there was no English embassy as such in Canton but that the East India Company maintained an establishment in its stead. Looking now at what lay ahead, she felt a moment's quaking. Could she manage to run away from Steele, attend to her own arrangements? She would need some money . . . There was the outside chance that the chairman of the East India's Select Committee might advance her what she needed. Her father did extensive business with the East India Company, and the name Cesares might have some weight. Well, it was something that only time could answer. She looked toward

Steele. He was excited about his victory over the Americans. He had beaten the record, setting a time of ninety-three days and nine hours. He was pleased with himself and anxious to set it to official documents at the Customs House.

She watched him move, call out orders to his men, take the helm, be everywhere it seemed, all at once. He was the very essence of everything she thought a man should be. He made her feel, and her mind was full with the sight and sound of the man Captain Steele. She had always listened raptly to her mother's tales about her adventures with her father. She had watched her parents at war, at play, at love, and she was not without good instincts about such relationships. Somehow she had to make him fall in love with her, but she was out of time. . . .

On the threshold of the New Forest, Sussex, England, there is sleepy hamlet known as Buckler's Hard, and on that village's edge lay Buckler's Grange. It as Buckler's Grange that was left to Drake Stafford when his mother died. It was a stately residence; it was old, rich with history, graceful in design, and mortgaged to the hilt. It galled Drake that his cousin, Charles Stafford, sixth Earl of Redcliff, had such vastly superior lands only three miles to the west. He paced now and caught a glimpse of himself in the gilt-edged mirror over his library fireplace. He rather fancied he was a handsome young man. His hair was fair and cropped in the latest style. He was known for his boyish charm and quick wit, but it was also known that he had to marry into money. He was not titled, and he had a reputation of being a dissolute young rake, and thus he had not successfully managed a courtship.

WILD DAWN FEVER

He had been looking forward to the arrival of Aunt Gussie's girl, Dawn Cesares. The estates the girl had inherited were nothing to him, but the cash, why it nearly made him tremble to think about it. Damn, if he didn't ride over to Stafford House and find out what was toward. Dawn Cesares should have arrived by now, or at least they should have word when she could be expected. Charles? Would he stand in his way? He pulled a thoughtful face. No. At least he had given no indication that he would. After all, Charles had enough to worry about without trying to put a rub in his way over this Cesares chit.

Stafford House and its vast lands was a thriving estate. Its tenant farmers had been supplied with the latest machinery. The soil was carefully cultivated. Its funds were cautiously invested. The earls of Stafford house had been careful, quiet, staid men whose interests had kept them away from London's costly hells. The present earl, Charles, was, to all outward appearances, cut in much the same light.

He was a man of average build and average height. His hair was a thick quantity of straight soft brown hair that fell without particular style around his pleasant face. His eyes were brown, and though they lacked a sure warmth, they were certainly not unattractive.

He stood in his library, a small room when compared with most of the spacious rooms Stafford House contained, and he stood reading a note he had just received from the Harbor Master in Southampton. He looked up and across at the young woman reclining casually on the yellow damask sofa. "Is it possible?" he asked, not really expecting an answer.

There was something in his voice that caused her to sit upright and stare at him. "Charles, what is it?"

He looked at her and wondered just how much he should confide in her. Stacy Stafford was engaged to be his wife. She was his second cousin. She was a tall, ethereal blonde with light gray eyes and classic good looks. Theirs would be the uniting of two old established estates. They had known each other forever and they were at times, friends . . . or very nearly, but he had never trusted her. Still, it would have to be discussed.

"It's this business about the Cesares chit," he answered thoughtfully.

"Oh." Stacy Stafford Welborn was one of the Staffords heartily put out over Augusta Stafford's will. She had fawned over the older woman for too many years and had expected something in return. "What about her?"

"I have just received word that wreckage from the *Flying Cloud* has been positively identified, and there were no survivors. . . ." His voice trailed off thoughtfully.

"So?"

"Stacy, don't you understand? Dawn was booked to make the trip to us on the *Flying Cloud*."

"Oh . . . do you mean . . . she is dead?" Her pale eyes opened wide with the flurry of thought and speculation.

He frowned. His late great-aunt Augusta had pulled the rug out from under him when she had left her estate, Windy Towers, to Dawn Cesares. This was a rich, vibrant, vast estate, and Charles had coveted it for many years, expecting that one day it would all be his. Augusta had never even hinted at the fortune she had accumulated over the years from her various investments, and when the will had been read, he had felt an anger he had not known himself

WILD DAWN FEVER

capable of feeling. Still, he had met Dawn some years ago, and he had found her a delightful child full of lively spirits and promising looks. He was sorry that he would not see her now, as an adult.

"It is a dreadful thing, Stacy, so don't look as though you could clap your hands!"

"Well, I am not a hypocrite when I don't have to be." She smiled and moved to touch his arm. "Does this mean, Charles, that you are next in line?"

Again he frowned. "Truth is, I don't know. That portion of the will was not to be divulged until necessary."

"Well, it is necessary now. Isn't it?"

"No. Gussie's solicitors are very good, very thorough. They will make a complete search for the little Cesares girl, just in case she was saved from the wreckage and returned home. It will take months before they confirm her death, and until then, we just don't know who Gussie named as next in line."

"Well, what do we do now?" She pouted.

He moved to his large desk. "I am going to write Jessica immediately, and I must be careful how I word this . . . on the chance that her daughter is alive . . . or was never even on the ship. There is the chance that they changed their minds at the last minute and that Dawn Cesares did not even sail."

"Hmmm" was all Stacy answered to this. She made herself comfortable on the sofa and thought about all of Gussie's money. It made her purr. Then she thought of Drake Stafford and sighed. It had been so long since she had seen him last. It was her fault, her doing, that he had stayed away. She had stopped him from paying her court,

and she had taken Charles's offer of marriage. After all, Drake had nothing. . . .

Drake. He was all she thought about, but her wedding date was set for the late spring, and she didn't want any complications. She had said she wouldn't meet him clandestinely anymore, but her will was beginning to waver. She wanted him, oh, how she wanted him, and as soon as she was married safely to Charles, she would take Drake as lover once more.

A bright sun gleamed through Steele's stateroom port-hole, its rays encompassing Dawn in soft, warm light. She stood, hands on hips and fire in her dark violet eyes. "What do you mean? Why can't I go into town with you? I won't be kept a prisoner here." She nearly stamped her foot.

His brow went up. "Listen to me, young lady," he said on a firm note. "Don't take that stance with me. It may have worked with others, but it will not do so with me."

"Yes, but—"

He smiled patronizingly. "It isn't I that have set these rules. It is the Chinese who won't allow you into Canton. They don't approve of foreigners. They consider us barbarians, and our women even more so." He grinned. "Never mind. I will get you everything you need, and I am accounted fairly knowledgeable in these things, so you may trust me to get the right colors for you."

"Yes, but Timmy said—" she started.

"Just what did Timmy say?" Again his brow was up and his tone sharp.

"Well, I . . . I understand that foreign women cannot go into Canton, but I believe I would be most welcome within the Factory district, so why—"

WILD DAWN FEVER

He cut her off again. "The Factory is the business district, and until I have obtained an invitation for you from one of our English patronesses, I would prefer you remained on board. Besides, you will feel more comfortable visiting the Factory district when you are properly attired." He reached out and tweaked her nose as his eyes traveled over her body.

Dawn nibbled at Steele's ear as he bent to pull on his boot. He chuckled and took her wrist, pulling her round and into his lap. "You are asking for—"

"Oh, I know what I am asking for," she interrupted him to whisper.

That won her a kiss, long, tender, and final, for he meant to finish his dressing and get to work. He had things to do. Still, the feel of her was a sore temptation, and his hand strayed to her breast. "It will have to wait till later." It was said on a husky note.

"Not fair."

"Oh?" His brow was up with amusement.

She was tracing with her lips a path from his mouth, down his chin, along his neck to his chest, while the fingers of her left hand played gently with the silky hair at the nape of his neck, and her right hand moved up his inner thigh. "Hmmm," she answered. "Not fair . . . because I never make you wait . . . till later."

He chuckled again, but this time when he kissed her, he was spurred not by affection but with the certain heat she was arousing in him through the use of her right hand inside his breeches. "Ah, sweetheart . . . at this rate . . . I will never get to Canton . . ."

"Oh, you will get to Canton, Steele . . . but first . . ."

She was again kissing him, teasing his tongue with her own, and teasing him with gentle hip movements as she played the seductress.

She had him in enough of a fever that a moment later she had him at the edge of the bed, his boots discarded. "Do you know, little one, that I think I have taught you too well?" he said softly as he lowered her to the bed.

All she knew was that she wanted him to remember her; she wanted him to remember their time together, and hence she had to make these last moments count.

She frowned but said nothing; instead her voice softened into a gentle entreaty. "Steele . . . ?"

"Aye, babe?" He was wary still.

"Will you find out if a ship is leaving for Argentina? I have a letter I want to send off to my parents."

He melted at once and took her into his arms. "Aye, sweetheart." She felt so good to the touch, but he dropped only a light kiss on her cherry lips and set her aside. Irritated with his aloofness, she decided to tease him for more and went back to him, pressing close to his body, getting up on her toes, holding his shoulders as she returned his kiss, this time with her lips parted. He held himself in check and set her aside again.

"That's enough for now." He had other things on his mind, business to conduct, and did not want to be distracted again.

"Oh, but, Steele . . ." She tempted him by pressing still closer, bringing his head lower, touching his lips lightly, then nibbling at his ear. He made an effort and put a halt to such proceedings.

"Save it for me, love." And so saying, he left her standing thoughtfully at his back.

WILD DAWN FEVER

He was a strong male, this captain of her heart. He had a will all his own, and how she would ever bend him to her own design, she didn't know. She shook this worry off. There were other things she had to concern herself about—like how she could manage to escape this ship and get to the East India's Select Committee. Timmy! She would seek out Tim and find out more about the Factory's territory and regulations. Timmy had been here before with his captain, and he would be sure to know.

Chapter Seventeen

*I*t was late into the evening, and Dawn sat with her arms folded across her chest. Her cheeks were flushed with the irritation of nerves she was then experiencing. Around her was an array of colors, gowns of fashionable design, small clothes in the finest of silks. Shoes, hats, scented soaps, all had been chosen and delivered to her only moments ago. His taste, she admitted reluctantly, was faultless. His manners, though, she thought, rather needed some refining. How dare he! How could he? Her reaction to his gifts was due to the short note she held still in her hand,

Dawn,

These trifles, I hope, will find approval.

Steele

That was all his epistle said. There was nothing to indicate

WILD DAWN FEVER

when he would return. There was no affection. There was nothing to soothe her ruffled pride.

If only she could row the longboat herself, she thought angrily. She would go this very night into the Factory and seek refuge! She would take only a portmanteau of a few of the gowns and leave him her address so that he could send her a bill for their cost, and off she would go. But how? And then she knew. Impulsive she had always been; impulsive she was now. His note. Faith, therein lay her answer.

She would alter his note. Yes, yes, she could just manage to squeeze in a line between her name and his. She took the piece of paper to his writing desk and dipped the quill in the dark indigo ink.

Dawn,

These trifles, I hope, will find approval. Have my men bring you to me at the East India's establishment when you are ready.

Steele

She studied her handiwork. Perfect, but would it fool Tim? It would have to do the job. Quickly she took up one of the captain's overnight portmanteaus and stuffed two gowns and some undergarments into it. Hurriedly she threw in a pair of shoes and then, casting a quick eye over what was left, she chose a gown of deep blue and slipped into it. A brush was rushed through her long black hair, which she tied at the nape of her neck with a blue ribbon. She glanced round the room and stopped a moment as a memory of her time with Steele flickered through her

mind. Not now. She must not think of that now. She threw the black velvet cloak round her shoulders and went in search of Tim. She found him topside.

He stopped what he was doing and eyed her and the leather bag she carried. "Eh, lass, whot's this?"

She couldn't answer him but shoved the note at him instead, waiting silently for his reaction. He frowned and looked at her. "Oi don't understand," he said at length. "The captain meant to stop at Russell & Co., the American commercial house, to log in his time, and then he was off to Canton. He didn't say anything about staying at the East India's house . . . oi don't know . . . mayhap somethin' is amiss?"

"Don't be silly," she answered breathlessly. "What could be amiss? No doubt he has made arrangements for me to stay there until I sail for England."

He appraised her quietly. "Aye." He knew the captain had intentions of settling her on another vessel for her journey to England, and it had disturbed him. She was apparently taking it very well. "Oi'll be missing ye, Dawn."

She touched his arm. "And I, you."

"Right, then. Oi'll row ye meself. Come on, then."

She didn't know how she managed it, but she kept up a stream of idle chitchat with Tim as he rowed her to shore and hired a sedan chair to take her the short distance to the East India's building. Here they were met at the door by a Chinese servant, and before Timmy could ask for his captain, Dawn hurriedly inquired, "Pardon, I know it is late, but I wish to have a private interview with the lady of the house."

The man displayed no surprise at this; after all, these

WILD DAWN FEVER

English were barbarians all, and forever up to one antic after another. He bowed and left them standing in the central hall. It was some moments before he returned and bowed again.

"Lady Amherst will see you in the yellow salon." He started to turn to lead her off but was detained by Dawn, who turned to Tim and offered her hand in gentle dismissal.

"I don't know if I will see you again. I hope so—perhaps in England. You were a friend to me, and I thank you, Tim Clark, for I desperately needed one when I was on the *Lightning*."

"Oi don't understand . . . Dawnie girl, whot's all this? Where is the captain?"

"He isn't here. I had to use a trick to get you to bring me here, you see. . . ."

"No, oi don't see."

She reached into her cloak pocket and sought the letter she had prepared some time earlier for her Captain Steele and handed it to Tim. "This is for the captain. I wish to make my own arrangements for myself. Please try and understand . . . and I will have my solicitor in London reimburse him for all expenses he incurred on my behalf." Quickly she got to her toes and planted a kiss on Timmy's cheek and then followed the waiting servant. Part one was over and done with. Now if only she could get through part two.

It was three days before Captain Steele concluded his business in Canton and made his way back to his vessel. He had the oddest sensation upon setting aboard his clipper, for he had a feeling of excitement and the feeling centered on Dawn. He made his way below with Timmy

fast on his heels in an attempt to prepare him, but the captain silenced his attempts with "It will keep, Tim, my man" and threw his cabin door open wide. She was not within.

He turned to Tim and pulled a face. "Where is she now—in the galley with Cook?"

"That's whot oi been trying to tell ye, Cap'n. She left."

Something cold went through the captain's heart, and sharply he requested, "What do you mean, she left?"

Timmy had kept the letter she had altered and gave it to his captain, who read the contents and ejaculated, "What is this? Why would someone trick her into leaving here? What devilry is afoot?" He started to cross the room for his gun but was stalled by Timmy.

"No, Captain. She penned it herself, she did. Said to tell you she would take care of herself and 'ave her people pay ye whatever ye spent on her."

"She what?" Steele thundered, his face a storm, his body blistering in sudden rage. "Take care of herself in Canton? The little fool!"

He paced for a while and then turned on Timmy again for answers. "Where did you take her? And why, for all that is holy, did you leave her?"

"Oi didn't 'ave much of a choice, now did oi, Cap'n'. Oi took her loike the letter says to the East India's house, and there she went into Lady Amherst's care. More than that oi don't know." Then remembering, he pulled out the folded notepaper he had been carrying in his pocket ever since. "She said to give this to ye."

The captain snatched it up as though it were a treasure and broke open the wax seal to read:

WILD DAWN FEVER

Dearest Steele,

Thank you, I shall always remember. Don't blame Tim; I fooled him, and I did so because I choose to leave you, not be discarded by you.

Dawn Cesares

He wanted to tear the letter to shreds. It irritated the hell out of him, though he would have been hard put to answer why it should.

That was all that was needed. He ordered the longboat put to, and with his cloak slung over his arm he was once again making for land.

Lady Amherst received Captain Steele in her yellow salon with open warmth. She had been friends with his parents, and she had developed an interest in the young man's lively exploits. She went forward now, all abustle in her mauve morning gown, and put her pudgy hands out to him. "Well, my lord!" There was a rebuke in her tone as she gave him both her hands.

He smiled at the small, round, gray-haired woman, and as he took up her hands he bent gallantly low over them. She laughed, and he brought up his twinkling blue eyes to find her expression brimful with mischief. Well, he thought, just what is she up to, the old she-devil? He was impatient to see Dawn, to shout at her, to . . . to what? That was something he had yet to answer, for he didn't quite know. He only knew that things could not be left as they were. That she was somewhere in the house enticed him to plain speaking, but he tempered it with the amenities. "My lady is ravishing as always," he said merrily and then more sincerely, "And it is good to see you, love."

"Ha!" she returned. "You put in four days ago and have only got round to visiting me now? Fie on you, sir!"

"Forgive me, dearest. I was in Canton on business, but here, you neglect me." He always took her by surprise.

"What do you mean, scamp?"

"I have beaten the American record. What say you to that?" He beamed happily.

She held both his arms and squeezed. "Good boy!" Then with a snap of her fingers, she exclaimed, "So much for the Yanks."

He then grew serious and guided her to the yellow damask sofa, saw her seated, and with his hands placed in each other at his back, he directed a grave countenance her way. "My lady, it has come to my attention that a young woman, Miss Cesares by name, has come to you while I was away."

"Dawn? Ah, yes. Lovely child. I am acquainted with her mother, though she is many years my junior. Lady Jessica Stafford, you know," she said in casual reply.

"Yes, yes. Did she mention how she happened to sail with me to China?"

"Oh, yes," answered Lady Amherst.

"Well?" demanded the captain.

"Well, what, love?" returned the lady.

"Devil," he responded, in some irritation of nerves. "Don't play with me, darling. Please send for her. . . . We . . . I have some business I must conclude with Miss Cesares."

"Hmmm. I imagine you do, but you will have to do so in England."

His lordship went white with shock and the sudden sure

WILD DAWN FEVER

knowledge of what she was saying, but he had to ask, "What do you mean?"

"Oh, my dear. . . ." She reached out and patted his hand, for she could see he was much affected. Odd that. He had early sworn off emotional entanglements, saying that love ruined pleasure. Ah, but perhaps this was only that great ego of his suddenly battered for the first time. "Dawn sailed for England yesterday afternoon."

"How . . . how could she? My lady, how could *you* send her off alone and unprotected?" Clearly his will had been thwarted, and he was outraged. The thought of his sweet, his vulnerable woman-child at the mercy of rakes on board some packet bound for England was suddenly driving him to distraction.

"What nonsense is this?" She put up her chin. "As though I would send such a tender morsel off alone. Haven't I told you, she is Lady Jessica Stafford's girl. No, no. Amherst's mother was getting weary of China. It was perfect. I paired the dowager with little Dawn, and off they went."

"I see." He had to think. Thoughts tumbled furiously in his mind. He came back with "What was the packet, and for what port was it bound?"

"Southampton. The dowager will see her to the earl's door, and then she will proceed to Cornwall, and the packet was the *Amber Wind*."

He paced a moment, and then he was bending over her hand. "Forgive me, my lady, but I have so much to do."

"Yes, love. I imagine you do," she said quietly. Dawn had told her enough for her to surmise that the two had formed some sort of feeling for each other; how far, or how deep this had gone, she could only guess.

Chapter Eighteen

“E*h, girl, what’s that you say?”* Lady Sarah, the dowager Amherst, was seventy-seven years old. She was spry, uncommonly fit, and nearly always ready to use her sharp wit. However, the noise of the persistent sea had drowned out Dawn’s last words. She had been reading to the dowager from the works of the older woman’s favorite poet, Lord Byron, and she smiled as she repeated, “ ‘The days of our youth are the days of our glory. . . .’ ”

“Ah, me,” agreed the dowager with a sigh. “He knew. . . . That he did.” Then after a pause the dowager put her hand on Dawn’s arm to stay her from further reading. “Did I tell you that I knew him well?” She nodded more to herself over the fact than to Dawn. “Knew him better than most. Why, I could tell you such things. . . .” She faded into the past, rocking herself in the dark upholstered rocking chair she had requested installed in her cabin stateroom.

Dawn smiled to think of the dowager as a young woman,

WILD DAWN FEVER

waltzing about a ballroom, up to every rig and conspiring perhaps with the wicked Lord Byron. And then, as it often did these days at sea, her attention wandered to Steele, his blue eyes twinkling, his lips sensual and so near her own, his voice low and husky in her ears. Stop! Oh, when would it stop?

Faith, how she missed him. Nothing seemed worthwhile without him. She moved from day to day, trying to live through the hours, pleased to have another day behind her, hoping the next might let her sleep. Two weeks. She had been at sea with the dowager for two weeks, and her heart ached, her mind writhed in torture, and all she could do was smile, for no one must know these things.

Questions haunted her—Did he think of her, did he miss her, would he care, would he make a push to see her again? And then the inevitable response—what if he didn't? Well, what then, Dawn Cesares? Never mind, never mind; can't think of that now.

"Girl?" The dowager recalled her to her surroundings. "You are off again." She was wise enough not to press too far, but it was time the child spoke about her problem; bloodletting was a good thing now and then. "Have a heartache, don't you, love?"

"A schoolgirl thing. It will . . . pass," answered Dawn.

"For that rascal, Norington, I'd wager," said the dowager knowingly.

Dawn looked at her in some surprise. "I . . . no . . . I mean . . ."

"Hush. Tell me it isn't my place to be at you like that. Tell me it is none of my affair."

She was smiling at Dawn, who laughed and said, "Just so, but yes, you wise old thing. It is Norington."

"Do you know," answered the dowager thoughtfully, "I'm chilled. Fetch me another blanket, and we will sit up here and talk."

"I will fetch you another blanket, but I don't know what you want me to talk about," said Dawn, the reserve touching her voice.

"Ah, but one doesn't get to be seventy-seven years old without having a great deal to talk about. So, as you don't know what to say, you will keep quiet and allow me the privilege," answered the dowager on a superior note.

Dawn laughed and conceded the moment to the dowager as she went off to do as she was bade.

There was going to be trouble in Canton over the opium the British insisted on bringing to China to balance their trade in tea. Steele studied the situation and decided that he had better collect his supplies and sail into safer waters. Aye, he could hear the rumbling going on among the Chinese, and it was the sound of danger. Right then, there was only one thing to do—sail for home. After all, he had come to China to beat the American record, and that he had done quite nicely. As for Dawn Cesares, well, she was gone, and he would probably never see her again. Just as well. Indeed, just as well.

In the week after Dawn's departure from China, Steele had worked himself and his men like a demon possessed. He hired some Chinese servants to speed delivery and storage of supplies. He bent with his men, working hand in hand with the refurbishing of his clipper. He rushed through last-minute purchases and, satisfied that his hull was full and his vessel seaworthy, he bade the Amhersts a

hasty farewell. He was for home. He was for England. Dawn Cesares? Well, she was already a memory.

All this time, his first mate, Timmy Clark, eyed him thoughtfully. Here was a different man from the one he had known for so long. Steele's moods in those ten days after Dawn's disappearance swung from one end of the spectrum to the other without visible cause, without warning. One moment Steele would be passing the most ribald of jests and the next frowning darkly. There was the enigma of the man that was Steele, Lord Norington. That was a fact. He was always his own man, kept his own counsel, and yet, Timmy saw him withdraw further into himself. Aye, he thought to himself, he could feel it, see it, but dare not ask after the cause.

Steele stood beside Timmy at his helm and watched China recede into a haze. He had done all that he had come to China to do, and yet he was *not* content! Why? Devil blast it all, why? A pair of deep violet eyes twinkled naughtily in a face full with lively mischief. Cherry lips pursed and tempted. A body firm, young, supple, and provocative teased him to touch, but damnation! This was nonsense. Dawn Cesares was a female . . . only a female, and females could be replaced. He had always replaced them before. And then, he thought, thank God the dowager Lady Amherst had accompanied Dawn to England. This because he had a guilt deep in his gut that gnawed at him still. She had been an innocent. She had been helpless, vulnerable, and lonely on his clipper, and he had used those facts to make her his own. She was a gently bred girl from a noble house. One did not seduce noble virgins. At least it had always been a rule of his not to do so in the past.

She had written that she would rather leave of her own accord, not be discarded by him. He had hurt her then . . . at least, she had understood that he had meant to put her aside, and her pride had moved her out of his reach. Right, then, better to forget her and move on.

He would never see her again, and that was an excellent thing. Right . . . an excellent thing.

Stacy Stafford Welborn reined her horse to a quick halt in the quiet of the New Forest. The sky was overcast, the air was damp, and there was a wind that whipped at her cheeks, but it was not the wind that put the color there. It was Drake Stafford. He dismounted his horse and tethered the roan to a nearby tree branch, staying with his mount only long enough to assure himself that the animal was content to graze.

She watched his deft progress as he made his way to her through the thick of the woods, as his hands reached out and took hold of her waist, lifting her from her sidesaddle with ease and then holding her against his body as he slowly brought her to the ground.

"I don't know what I am doing here," she said on a husky note. "We, we really shouldn't see each other . . . at least, not now."

"You are here because I sent for you. You are here because you are mine." It was a growl of a sound wrenched from him. Here was the woman of his choice. He had courted her, seduced her, won her heart, and still she would not give him her hand, only her body. A marriage with Stacy would see his estates set in order, for hers was a substantial inheritance. Yet, she would marry Charles for a title. It was infuriating.

WILD DAWN FEVER

"Yes, darling," she whispered, "I am yours." She was a tall woman, nearly as tall as he, and had only to lift slightly to put her lips to his.

He set her from him, still angry with her. "Such treachery in a woman!"

"I am not treacherous. I am doing what I was brought up to do. Marry for convenience and love for pleasure," she answered glibly.

"I won't have it!" he threatened. "I won't allow him to touch you. Stacy, you have always been mine. You are meant for me. How can you bear to think of his hands on you?"

She shuddered. That was something she didn't dwell upon. She had always believed that because she and Charles were friends, it would be an easy enough task to allow him his conjugal rights.

"Stop it, Drake, or I will leave now."

He took her into his arms, and his mouth closed on hers hard and demanding until her tongue joined with his and she felt herself melt into his embrace. "You are not going to leave me now. Ah, Stacy, you want me as much as I want you . . . admit it!"

"Yes, yes, I do . . . oh, now, quickly . . ." She was undoing her riding habit, lowering herself to the pine needles that would serve as their bed, hoping her clothes would not soil too noticeably.

Part Two



Chapter One

The dowager's hired chaise skirted Buckler's Hard as it passed through Beaulieu. Dawn sighed with pleasure to see the familiar village and gazed at well-known haunts from her prior visits. Oh, it was so good to be here at last after so long at sea. The dowager rattled on in her style, smiling to herself to see Dawn's face plastered to the closed carriage window.

The New Forest stretched out before them, rich, green, and elusive. New Forest oaks lined the road, and stately evergreens laced the air with their pine scent. A small herd of young deer stopped their grazing deep in the woods to watch the carriage rumble by, and Dawn just managed to see them as they nervously loped off deeper into the woods.

The chaise turned, and Dawn nearly clapped her hands to see the winding four-hundred-yard-long drive that would take her to Stafford House. Five months! She had been at sea for more than five months, for she could not count her

three days in China. By now her parents would have her letter, so she could relax and enjoy England, forget Steele. Would she ever forget Steele? Who was it who said "Time washes clean love's wounds"? She would really like to know who said such a thing, so that she might apply yet another question: How much time?

Certainly not the two months it had taken to reach England from China. No, she had not washed him out of her system, though the ache of not seeing him, not having him, had mellowed into a quiet yearning, and she knew she was undergoing a change. She was no longer the bubbling, optimistic girl filled with a lust for life. Too much had happened too soon. There had been her experience at home with Meza, his attack on her in the sanctuary of her home. There had been his death. Then Maria. Oh, Maria, who had been with her forever, now gone because Dawn had brought her with her across the Atlantic. And if that had not been enough to sink her soul, there had been her encounter with Steele, captain and lord of her heart, her body, her will, and now of her melancholy. She had fallen inexplicably in love with him, and her love had been unrequited. She arrived at Stafford House, a regal woman, subdued, wary, and lonely, but this time her loneliness had left her cautious instead of vulnerable.

The Stafford household was in readiness for their arrival as the dowager, wise in her way, had sent word before them. The post chaise came to a halt outside massive front double doors. A servant swung the doors wide, and the earl rushed down the marble steps, hands outstretched.

Dawn smiled to herself as she followed the dowager out of the carriage and looked up to find Charles already taking her into a hearty embrace. When she had visited

Stafford House in the past, it had belonged to her mother's late uncle, and Charles had been a young man in his late twenties, quiet and reserved. She had been quite the opposite, for she had been the rough-and tumble tomboy. He held her by her shoulders, and her dark violet eyes found his soft brown ones. He must be thirty now, she thought to herself, and quite pleasant-looking at that.

"Dawn . . . I can't tell you what a relief it is to have you home with us safe and sound." He turned to the dowager, but his arm had slipped round Dawn's shoulders. "How can I ever thank you, Sarah?"

"Get me out of this cold, and feed me" was the lady's quick response.

They laughed, and as they took the steps into the house, the young earl began hurling question after question, hardly waiting for answers. Dawn responded without elaborating, for she was still unable to discuss the sinking of the *Flying Cloud* and the loss of Maria.

Charles was frowning thoughtfully. "The *Lightning*, you say, dear?"

"Yes," answered Dawn, watching him cautiously. "Why?"

"You can't mean you were on Lord Norington's clipper?" he remarked in some surprise.

"I was."

"Certes," exclaimed Charles. "You poor darling." And then he cast a questioning glance toward the dowager. "Er . . . how many people are aware that she sailed into China with his lordship?"

"Only my son and daughter-in-law," the dowager answered gravely. "And, Charles, you have no need to worry about her reputation. She will do."

"Eh . . . I don't know. It would be better if we did not let that piece of information get abroad."

"Agreed," said the dowager. "All anyone need know is that she sailed into Southampton under my protection." She looked about. "Where is Elizabeth?"

"My aunt is due to return this afternoon—she was in London with friends for a few days—so you needn't worry; Dawn will be chaperoned at Stafford House." He smiled.

"Are you two quite finished settling my reputation between you?" Dawn's brow was up.

"Oh, take a damper!" said the dowager with the hint of a smile, though she kept her tone firm. "Some things are necessary." She pointed to the tray of tea and cakes the serving girl had just brought in and set down. "You may do the honors, my love."

"You are a dreadful old cat," said Dawn, mitigating this by touching the dowager's arm affectionately. "But I do adore you." She sighed as she poured the tea. "I wish you could stay on with us here."

"Do you? After two months at sea closeted in my company I should think you heartily sick of this dreadful old cat."

"Hmmm. I should be, but one grows attached to such creatures." She ducked as the older woman threw a round pillow at her head and wagged her finger. "Fie on you, my lady, you made me nearly spill your tea."

Charles watched the two and found himself refreshingly amused. Dawn Cesares was all that he remembered and more, for she had blossomed into a woman, a most beautiful woman. It occurred to him that it was a good thing he had asked his aunt to remain at Stafford House for the duration of Dawn's visit.

Drake Stafford looked up in some surprise as Stacy Stafford Welborn was announced. His was an ancient home, but there was no woman in residence, and therefore it was not the thing for a woman to pay him an unchaperoned call. He got up from his writing desk where he had been attempting to sort out some of his debts and went forward to receive her as his servant left them alone.

"Darling . . ." he said, and as he took her broad shoulders he admired the Junoesque lines of her form, finding her blond looks quite stunning in the blue silk ensemble she wore.

Impatiently she pulled out of his hold and drew off her dark leather gloves. "*She* has arrived."

"She?" He frowned. "I don't precisely understand."

"Dawn Cesares! Augusta's little heir," Stacy snapped irritably.

"Never say so!" He was surprised, and already his mind began to work. He had given the girl over as dead, thinking she had gone down with the *Flying Cloud*. This put new hope into his situation again.

Stacy eyed him suspiciously. "What are you thinking?"

"Nothing, nothing." He went to her again. "But why all this gloom? Surely your marriage to Charles will have you forever after in town houses, jewels, and balls?" There was a sarcastic tone to his words.

She ignored it and proceeded. "Drake, don't you see? With the Cesares chit out of the picture, one of us would have inherited, perhaps even you."

"Nonsense. She didn't like either one of us. Charles was probably next in line," he said thoughtfully.

"Well, it is all a bother, for Charles will expect me to

take her shopping and introduce her round, and all manner of things and what if she is . . . beautiful?"

He laughed this off. "She couldn't match your magnificence, so buck up and go home." This more sternly. "You shouldn't be here, and if your father gets drift of it, there will be all hell to pay."

"Father doesn't know what I do with my time because he doesn't care. He is in London again with his cronies and his club," she scoffed derisively.

"Nevertheless, someone might bring his attention to it, and then he might think it necessary to oversee your doings, and that, my dear, would not be convenient to us, now, would it."

Reluctantly she agreed to this but wound her arms about his neck. "Right, then, I will go. After a kiss, just one kiss."

Chapter Two

A bright sun gleamed through the library's panoramic window and enveloped the room's occupants with its morning warmth. A snapping fire burned in the grate, and conversation was already beginning to sparkle.

Dawn was clothed in the light blue gown Steele had purchased for her in Canton, and her long black hair was piled high on her head. She looked a ravishing thing, for some of her old sparkle had returned to her. She was bubbling now, her legs tucked under her where she sat propped up on the dark brown velvet sofa with the dowager. "Oh, but please, Sarah, you simply can't leave me now. . . ." she entreated.

The dowager smiled affectionately at Dawn, for she had grown extremely fond of the girl in their time together at sea, and the truth was that she had nothing pressing to take her to Cornwall. However, she did not want to become further attached to Dawn. It wouldn't do, and besides, the girl needed to be on her own, make her own way, her own decisions. "You have Charles and his aunt Elizabeth—"

"What is that to say to anything?" Charles put in spontaneously. He was not given over to his impulses, but he could see that Dawn felt comfortable with the dowager, and he felt it would be a good thing if the woman stayed on, at least for a time. "You are welcome here at Stafford House always. I wish you would stay."

She shook her head, but she was feeling inclined to stay, if only to see Dawn properly established, but, ah, Elizabeth might wish to do that, and she wouldn't want to be in Elizabeth's way. "No, my family is expecting me, you see. . . ." She thought of her family in Cornwall. A son, his wife, and their two grown boys forever making her feel like an old woman unable to do for herself. Ah, faith, she didn't even miss them. Her own blood, and she would rather stay with someone's else's child.

The library door was opened, and the butler, Bailey, stepped inside. He was holding a silver salver, and he presented this to the earl. Charles opened the sealed envelope and read. "Of all the—this does pose a problem!" he exclaimed testily.

Dawn eyed him and tilted her head. "What is it, Charles? May I help?"

He eyed her ruefully. "My dear . . . it appears that my aunt is detained with . . . of all the blasted things . . . the measles!"

"The *what?*" the dowager nearly screeched before she was taken off into waves of wicked laughter.

"It isn't funny," said Dawn in some surprise.

"Oh, but it is. If you knew Elizabeth . . ." said the dowager again, peeling off into mirth. She was joined by Charles while Dawn watched the two for a time before she saw the light.

"Sarah!" she said commandingly all at once, and received the attention of the room. "You know of course that this means you *must* stay!"

"She is right there," agreed Charles, now grinning broadly at the older woman. "You can't go off and leave Dawn in my unscrupulous company."

"I daresay she would be safe with you, Charles," said the dowager dryly.

"Now, I take exception to that!" roared Charles half in earnest. "I can ogle and rake up a storm with the best of them."

"I don't doubt you could, but never would I believe that you would take advantage of a girl in your own home under your direct protection." The dowager's brow was up, daring him to contradict her. Satisfied at his silence, she proceeded, "However, not everyone knows you nearly so well, hence I suppose I must stay until Elizabeth finds herself"—she beamed brightly—"recovered."

Dawn threw her arms around the older woman; however, they were once again interrupted. The library door was flung open with considerable style, and a large, fair, extremely fashionable girl of some twenty years strode self-assuredly into the room. "Good morning," said Stacy Stafford Welborn, looking directly at Dawn and then looking her over.

Charles went immediately forward to take her hand and draw her into the circle. "Stacy, how lovely that you are here." He turned to Dawn, who was now sitting properly on the sofa and smiling expectantly. "Stacy, I have the pleasure at long last, to introduce to you Lady Jessica's daughter, Dawn." He smiled at Dawn. "Stacy is a second

cousin, you know, and my fiancée." He then turned and introduced the dowager.

"Oh, but I know Lady Amherst well," said Stacy, dropping just the most perfect curtsy. "We had occasion to meet in London during my Season last year."

"Did we?" said the dowager coldly. "I don't seem to recall, though I knew your mother. A flighty woman given over to whims and nonsense."

Stacy giggled behind her hand but then agreed that she had to admit her mother had been just such a woman. She then drew Charles aside and commented in his ear, "Why is your cousin dressed in that ghastly gown? I thought you told me that she and her family were well endowed?"

He moved her to the sideboard and took up a plate as though he were serving her. There was a frown drawing his brows together. "Hush, Stacy. You should know better. The poor girl was nearly taken by the sea. She bought what she could in the way of gowns in China." He then patted Stacy's hand. "I know you will take her to London and see to it that she finds all she needs to refurbish her wardrobe."

During this time Dawn had bent to the dowager and whispered, "You wretched thing. How could you say such a thing about her mother?"

"Ah, I am eccentric and old. I am expected to say the unexpected. The question you should ask me is, how could *she* allow me to slur her mother's memory without putting me in my place?"

"Because I would wager that she is, like everyone else, quite frightened to death of you," returned Dawn saucily.

"*You* do not seem to be, and I would wager that if I

dared to criticize your people, you would not allow me to get away with it."

Dawn smiled. "Oh, I might, for I am loath to come to grips with you."

"Yet, my dearest girl, you are doing just that, and over a stranger!" said the dowager glibly, closing the subject.

Dawn was effectively silenced for the moment, and it was just as well, for Stacy returned to them and took up a lady's chair directly across from Dawn. From this vantage point Stacy assumed town manners and began to inform the dowager about the latest *on-dits* in the hopes of winning her over with gossip. The dowager yawned until she could stand no more.

"Well," she said, nearly cutting Miss Welborn off in mid-paragraph. "Didn't you tell me you wanted a ride this morning, my love?" This was addressed to Dawn.

"Oh, yes, but it can wait," said Dawn politely.

"No, it can't, because as soon as you return I shall be ready to go into town. You will want a few things before we leave for our London shopping," said the dowager, making it up as she went along and finding herself well pleased with her new plans. She turned to Charles. "Take her off to your stables, and see that she is properly mounted."

"I . . . I don't even have a riding habit. . . ." Dawn was blushing, for she felt this was very rude to Stacy.

"No, you don't; so you will confine your ride to Stafford land, m'girl," answered the dowager, her finger emphasizing her words. "Go on, go on. I am just going to lie here and take a few minutes nap. . . ." She turned to Stacy. "Good day to you, Miss Welborn. Give my regards to your father."

There was little Stacy could do. She had been summarily dismissed. Stafford House was apparently under the dowager's momentary rule, and she could not flout such a powerful woman's authority. For some reason the dowager had decided to hold her in some dislike. Why, Stacy could not understand, but old women were ever such fusty things! Nevertheless, could it be that the dowager had decided to win over Charles for Dawn? No. She wouldn't dare. After all, the banns had been posted. If Charles were to break off his engagement with her now . . . for Dawn Cesares, it would kick up the devil of a scandal, and she doubted the dowager would instigate such proceedings. Or would she? Well, well, this was something Stacy would have to watch.

In the course of the next three weeks Dawn accompanied Stacy to London on two occasions. They rode in the Stafford coach, with four outriders. She found she could not warm to the girl and was most uncomfortable in Stacy's company. However, she was thankful to Stacy, for she did take her to the finest Bond Street shops. Once there, however, Dawn did not allow Stacy to guide her, for she had always had a mind of her own, and knew just what to wear.

It was on the second of these visits that Dawn first met Drake Stafford. She and Stacy were politely discussing a gown that Dawn had just purchased. Dawn's brow and temper were up, for she resented Stacy's attitude of superiority. Stacy, feeling that Dawn had been brought up in a heathen country, had been surprised to find that the girl was quite capable of choosing some very fine styles and colors for herself. It was with considerable envy that she watched Dawn's fitting for her last selection, a confection

of white and silver. However, when the seamstress took a red silk rose and attached it to the one shoulder and then matched another for Dawn's hair, Stacy felt she could have cried. The girl was ravishing! There was no one to compete with the shine in the girl's eyes, the glow of her complexion, the gleaming lights in her thick black hair. This was too much.

They were leaving the shop, and Stacy was exclaiming petulantly, "Don't you think it a bit much, my dear?"

"No, I have already told you, I think the red rose's effect quite charming. Everyone wears white and silver, but has anyone dared to be just a bit different and splash it . . . only lightly with color?" She shook her head. "It will do."

"Stacy!" a male voice exclaimed happily, and Dawn watched as Drake Stafford came forward and took up Stacy's gloved hand to put it to his lips briefly. She caught a look that passed between the two and felt a moment's surprise. Now, just what was this? The man in the dark beaver top hat and many-tiered dark greatcoat turned expectantly to her, and Stacy made the introductions.

Drake found it an easy thing to make Dawn the object of his attentions, and with total disregard for Stacy's feelings in the matter, proceeded to do so outrageously. He took them along and ushered them into a fashionable coffee shop, where they spent a lively hour. Drake could be most charming when he chose, and he certainly chose. Stacy watched him out of narrowed eyes and was ready to kick him under the table for his neglect, but managed to control her temper until he was handing them into the Stafford coach. It was there that she turned on him and, with gritted

teeth, said beneath her breath, "Hateful man, you shall pay for this afternoon's work. Mark me on it!"

"Shall I, my love?" he whispered in return, and put her gloved fingers to his lips. "I certainly hope so. Perhaps with my name? Who knows? It may be that our little Cesares girl may feel *her* fortune and *my* name would suit? What think you?"

"Oooh!" she squealed, turned on her heel, and gracefully flew into the carriage. Then she took up a seat opposite Dawn, and with cheeks flushed with anger she stared out the window and away from Drake.

Dawn could not imagine what was wrong with the girl, so she ignored Stacy's mood and smiled at Drake through the window as he waved them off. She then turned and contemplated Stacy before she posed the question, "Stacy . . . is Drake an old beau . . . ?" It was an attempt at friendship, at understanding.

Stacy went rigid, for she would never give her friendship to Dawn Cesares. She saw in Dawn a rival, not a comrade. "Certainly not!" she snapped.

"No?" She sensed Stacy's resentment and sighed, but the imp in her replied, "I am glad to hear it."

"What do you mean? Why should you be?" Stacy was irritable. "What difference does it make to you whether he was one of my suitors?"

"The only difference it would make to me," said Dawn enigmatically, "would be if he were still a suitor."

"It wouldn't matter . . . would it? After all, I am engaged to marry Charles."

"So you are, but it might matter all the same," said Dawn. She could see that her little play on words was

disturbing Stacy. Why it should, she couldn't understand, but that it was ruffling the girl was intriguing.

There didn't seem to be anything Stacy cared to say to this, so she sought refuge at her window and contemplated the passing scenes. The sooner she was married to Charles, the better. Then she could go about her business with Drake . . . yes, but what was Drake up to? Was he really going to pursue the Cesares chit in earnest? She wouldn't have it!

Chapter Three

Norington Grange was an estate of considerable years, elegance, and size. Its history dated back as far as Tudor times, and its management had won its present stately condition. Its extensive parks and woods skirted the New Forest on one side and the sea town of Lymington on the other. It was only one of the four residences that belonged to Lord Norington, but it was certainly his favorite. He stood now at the panoramic window he had installed only last year and gazed absently on the neatly landscaped lawn and thought of Dawn.

Even as her face came to mind it irritated him. Why was he still thinking of the girl? Because it was unfinished business? Because Stafford House lay just seven miles away? Because it was natural, he ended up telling himself, that he should wish the girl well and want to know that she had arrived safely. Indeed, Charles, the present Earl of Redcliff was an acquaintance, and it would be the most natural thing for him to pay a morning visit and see how she went on.

His vessel he had left in Timmy's capable hands, for it was in need of repairs, and he had planned on traveling on to London, but first he just might ride over to Stafford House and pay a call. Why not? He frowned over this, for something certainly was stopping him. No, he decided, better to leave it as it stood. Better not to . . . to what? Don't get involved. You said your good-byes to the girl, and it was a book that was ended. Right? Right. So he ordered his dapple gray brought to the front of the house!

His lordship's stable staff had groomed and cared for his prime bloods while he had been at sea, but only the youngest of the grooms had dared to mount Bold, Steele's dapple gray. Here was a gelding that was more hot blood than cold and full of mischief. So it was that Lord Norington found his gray well rounded and unfit for hard riding. He grumbled about this as he mounted his animal and schooled him down his long drive to the main road. Bold pranced, spooked, and with head and ears alert, attempted to advise his master that for too many months he had only played in the paddocks. Steele kept him in hand, sat through a few playful bucks, discouraged him from rearing, and managed him onto the road. Thus it was slow going for the first mile, but his lordship was thoroughly enjoying himself and his animal.

At length he allowed him to trot and discovered that his gelding could extend very well indeed. He laughed out loud. "Want to run, do you?" he asked, and gave his horse rein. Bold answered in the affirmative, and off they went. Steele went forward with his steed, and after some distance decided that Bold would never stop unless asked, so politely he made the request. He was right in thinking Bold did not wish to stop. He didn't. Steele zigzagged the

reins and sat back on his horse's kidneys. Bold threw his head about and refused to be told what to do. He wanted to run, and though he was blowing and though he was unfit, that was what he wanted to do. However, he had met his match in Steele Norington. Steele had schooled him well before he had taken to the sea, and it was time to remind Bold who was master. He used a pulley rein, and half halted with his legs simultaneously. This enabled him to check his animal, not stop him, but it did give the gelding pause to think, and his thought was "Ah, I have a rider on my back." Quickly, before his gelding could get the bit and control, Steele brought him in short until he had him under him and then fully halted. He patted Bold's neck and soothed him with gentle but firm words, and Bold began to remember the man, the training, the affection. They walked for a length of time, both in perfect harmony, both absorbed in each other before Stafford lands were sighted. He took Bold into an easy trot and turned up the drive to Stafford House. As he passed the stables and proceeded round the circular drive he thought of Dawn. Damn, but he couldn't wait to see her. That was absurd, but it was true. Yet they would be strangers to each other. Would it be awkward? Yes, these things always were.

He was filled suddenly with guilt. She had been a child. A virgin child, and he had seduced her . . . hadn't he? Hell, no! She had known what she was doing. He hadn't made her any promises. She had known it was a physical thing only . . . hadn't she? Yes, for she had taken their ending like a trooper. Sweet girl. His thoughts moved from there to the question, would they be alone? He couldn't very well ask to see her alone, now, could he? No, damn it, and that was what he needed, to see her

alone, if only to tell her . . . if only to tell her she had been wrong for leaving him as she had.

Dawn's black hair had been styled in fashionable curls that framed her forehead, face, and ears. Its long waves fell in loose thick silk to her waist. She wore a morning gown of rich amber velvet that was cut low over her breasts and fitted tightly at her small waist. She looked a picture bending over Charles who was seated at his writing desk in the library. They were composing a letter to her parents and laughing over an incident Charles had described at length when the library doors opened and the butler announced, "His lordship, Captain Steele Norington."

Charles felt Dawn's hand on his shoulder suddenly tighten, and he sensed her agitation, but there wasn't time to say anything, for his lordship was already in the room. Steele found the scene that met his eyes vexing in the extreme. She looked happy standing there with Charles seated so sensually close to her legs. Damn, she looked happy and beautiful, more beautiful than he had recalled.

Charles stood and went forward, his hand extended. "Steele! It is good to see you. When did you land?"

Steele was reluctant to say and was evasive. "Not long ago. How are you, Charles?" He was already moving in, taking up Dawn's trembling hand, putting it to his lips, closing his blue eyes as he kissed her fingers and then opening his eyes to find her own deep violet ones. Theirs was a look, indeed, and Dawn knew she never wanted to look away. Faith, how this man made her feel. How everything about him made her tremble and tingle and long . . . NO! She would not be trapped by such feelings again.

Her violet eyes took him back in time to the moment he

had first possessed her. Vividly he recalled the feel of her lovely body in his hands. Heatedly he remembered the thrill of making her his own. He felt a rush of desire sweep through him all too quickly, almost devastatingly. However, he was a self-willed man, always in control, and he used his wisdom to restrain such feelings. It wasn't the time or the place, and so he said with perfect aloofness, "Hallo, Miss Cesares." Only his blue eyes teased her to remember what had passed between them. "It is a pleasure to see you again, and looking so very charming."

She felt shy, intimidated by his self-assurance, his manliness, his captivating good looks, and awkwardly she searched for something brilliant to say. She managed in something of a soft voice. "And you, Captain Steele, but, la, you have arrived in England so much sooner than I expected."

"Coffee!" said Charles spontaneously. This was the man who had rescued his darling Dawn. He would make him welcome. Happily he moved off to the bellrope.

"No, no, Charles," said the captain, whose blue eyes still raked Dawn from head to foot in a manner that had the blush hot on her cheeks. "I won't be staying that long—"

"Oh, yes, you will, for I have a great many things I want to ask you," answered Charles adamantly.

"Such as?" His lordship chuckled.

"China!" answered Charles, who had never been farther than France. "I want to know all about China and the opium nonsense going on down there." He proceeded to pull the bellrope and went afterward to meet the servant at the door.

Steele used this interval to turn his full attention to

Dawn. He nearly wagged a finger at her but restrained the urge and said, the gleam of annoyance in his deep blue eyes, "You, my brat, owe me an apology."

"Do I?" She feigned ignorance. "I don't understand." And then as though with sudden understanding, "Oh . . . but I told you, I did not expect you so soon, otherwise I would have had my solicitor contact you for an accounting of what I owe—"

"*That!*" he cut her off harshly, "was not what I meant, and what is more, you know it!" His brow was up, and though Charles, having discharged his servant with an order for various breakfast foods, was now coming their way, he proceeded to rebuke her. "What you did was—"

Dawn cut him off; her own dark-winged brow was up, and there was sure anger flashing in her violet eyes. "Ungrateful of me? Is that what you mean?"

Charles was upon them, and no more could be said, but Dawn was satisfied, for she could see she had fueled his temper. He would not be satisfied until he had talked this subject out with her, and in order to do that, he would need to see her again, wouldn't he?

"Well," said Charles, rubbing his hands together, "now tell me, are we going to have trouble in Canton? I have been told that the Chinese don't mean to let us ship any more opium into the country."

Things were looking ugly between England and China, for it was true, the English were shipping opium into China against the Emperor's wishes, and there was talk of war. It was topic enough to hold the two men in conversation through a lengthy breakfast, and Dawn had the opportunity to watch his lordship, Captain Steele Norington, to her heart's content. What now, she asked herself, but had

her answer unexpectedly when the captain rose to take his leave of them. He turned to Dawn and smiled wickedly.

"As I recall you once told me you were something of a horsewoman?"

"What I told you, my lord," she corrected politely, "was that I love horses and riding."

"Same thing, child," he responded in a superior voice, and had the pleasure to witness her blush.

She inclined her head and said softly, "As you say."

"Then perhaps you might allow me the pleasure of showing you some of the countryside tomorrow?"

"That is very kind of you, my lord, but Charles has been taking me about. . . ." She allowed her voice to trail off as she glanced at the earl.

Charles was caught in the social moment. What does one do? The friendly thing would be to allow her to ride with Norington, but as her guardian, which he was not, of course, perhaps he should put a stop to any of Norington's advances? Besides, he wasn't sure he wanted her riding off with rake Norington. This was a problem. Norington was beau monde, a pink of the ton, and he didn't want to be accused of putting a rub in the way of her making a match. Yet, he didn't want her alone with him, especially because of the circumstances of their meeting. Still, one couldn't insult one's own. What to do? Aha! All at once he knew just what he would do. "I have it!" he announced brightly.

Both Steele and Dawn looked at him in some surprise.

"We'll make a party of it," concluded Charles merrily.

Steele was not pleased, and it showed in the dryness of his tone. "Will we?"

"Make a party out of what?" asked Dawn quizzingly,

WILD DAWN FEVER

for she only meant to tease. Mildly she was aware of his manipulation in the matter and was displeased.

"You will love it immensely. I will send a message over to Stacy to join us," he returned, ignoring Steele's haughty air and Dawn's sudden coolness.

"Then, how, pray, will I enjoy it?" This time Dawn was smiling and moving to pinch his cheek, for he was aware that Dawn and Stacy were at opposite ends of the pole.

With the greatest of ease he evaded this and continued in his jolly way. "We can ride through the forest and make tracks to this very lovely inn, the Manor Tea House, and take luncheon there. You will like that, my Dawn; see if you don't." He turned to Steele. "What say you?"

"What can I say?" returned Norington gallantly. He was used to getting his own way sooner or later, and he kept that end in mind. His object was to get Dawn alone, and that was still in his sights. "If Dawn is to be one of the party, so must I then." He gave no one the opportunity to reply to this but purposely moved to take up Dawn's hand and put it caressingly to his lips. His voice was a soft, touching, "Until tomorrow."

He had the power to send chills through her. She felt herself trembling again and couldn't look away from his mesmerizing blue eyes; couldn't pull out of his hold. However, once again they were interrupted as the butler announced Mr. Drake Stafford. Captain Steele turned and found a young rogue, perhaps three or four years younger than himself, fair-haired and rakishly attired in the fashion of the day. He could see that the fellow was tall enough, handsome enough, and certainly charming enough to turn a maid's head, and he could not help but notice the quick

smile that came to Dawn's face as she went to greet him.

Well, well, thought Steele, what have we here? A suitor? He looked to Charles, who was frowning, and his interest was further caught. It was apparent that the earl did not approve of this one if he was a suitor. Why? Did the earl want Dawn for himself? Was that the reason for the intrusion tomorrow?

He stood in quiet conversation with the earl for a moment while Dawn kept Drake in an easy banter that was obviously enjoyable to them both. However, she remembered her manners, and leading him by the hand, took him to meet Norington. Steele could not help but be aware that Drake looked him over speculatively, almost like a cock appraising his competition, and though normally he would have found it amusing, this time he did not. Drake soon returned his entire attention to Dawn, who seemed pleased enough to have it, and in some disgust Steele set a time with Charles for the next morning and abruptly took his leave.

Dawn did not watch him go but was all too aware of his leaving. It was as though all sunshine had departed. She had a sure feeling of emptiness, of having lost purpose, and she very nearly sighed. She chided herself and put special effort into giving Drake her wholehearted attention until Charles reminded her she had an appointment to go to in the village with the dowager.

Drake watched her leave and turned to Charles and smiled. "That, my cousin, was very transparent."

"I don't know what you mean." Charles was not friendly.

"Don't you? Perhaps you need it spelled out?" Drake

WILD DAWN FEVER

returned sharply, for he did not mean to be thwarted in his efforts to have Dawn.

"You overstep," said Charles quietly, but grimly.

"Do I? To all appearances, Cousin, it is you who oversteps!" snapped Drake.

"How so?" Charles was sorry he was goaded into this reply as soon as the question was out.

"You are not her guardian, and even if you were, there can be no objection to my paying Dawn court!" There it was out. He had been surprised in the last couple of weeks to find Charles attempting to put a stop to his suit for Dawn's hand.

"I disagree. She deserves better than you," Charles returned gravely.

"Ah, so that is it? You want her for yourself!" Drake riposted bitingly.

"Nonsense. I am engaged to marry Stacy, and well you know it. I care for Dawn. She is a dear girl, and I don't want her making the mistake of taking a fortune hunter, which, *Cousin*, you are!" Charles seldom lost his temper to the point where he would loosen his tongue, but there was something in Drake's accusation that put him on the defensive.

"There is no point in arguing the issue," Drake said suddenly on a reasonable note. "I *am* in financial difficulties, as is often the case with members of our class. That is why there are marriages of convenience. However, if Dawn were to take my suit, it would make me the happiest man alive, because I am in love with her." He shook his head. "I don't see how you can doubt that, for as I said, I believe you are half in love with her yourself."

Charles could not be easily taken in by such a speech.

He sneered beautifully. "You forget to whom you speak. I have known you all my life, Drake. Try again."

"Mark me, Charles. I mean to have her." He was in a rage now. "Damn it, man! You have Stacy, don't you? Isn't that enough?"

"Enough? Tell me, will Windy Towers be enough for you?" answered Charles.

"Aye! And the one million that comes with it!" Hell, but he hadn't meant to let that one slip.

Charles's brow went up, and he breathed on a low note. "So, you know?"

"Of course I know. Do you think something like that could get by me? Thought they kept it all hushed up, did you?"

"Yes, I thought they did. Dawn hasn't even been told. They mean to meet with her next week, on her twenty-first birthday, and tell her about the extent of her inheritance then. Right, then. So you mean to have her, but, dear Drake, I don't think she will take *you*."

"Oh, don't you?" Drake turned on his heel and started for the door. "We will see. We will just have to wait and see."

Charles stood for a long time after his cousin had left and was interrupted in his thoughts only when the door opened and Dawn popped her head in with a smile. "We are off," she announced happily. "Sarah says we will stay for high tea at the Brockenhursts, so don't worry."

He smiled and waved her off. This was something he had not anticipated. Drake had sorely intruded on his plans, and it was a matter he would have to deal with.

Chapter Four

*S*omehow Dawn managed to get through the night. It wasn't easy, and sleep eluded her for a good part of it, but when she got to her feet, she discovered that she was charged with anticipation. With extreme care she donned her forest green velvet riding habit, smoothing its form-fitting lines over her alluring body. She had dressed her hair at the top of her head, allowing a few long tresses to dangle over one ear and shoulder. She sported a top hat at a naughty angle, so that its flowing white scarf mingled with the hair she had allowed to escape over the one ear.

She smiled at Charles as he gave her a leg up, and she bent to pat the chestnut gelding, Perversity, that she had purchased from Tattersall's the week before. He was five years old, well-mannered, and always ready to go. She didn't like riding sidesaddle, but the dowager had insisted that in such a party she must. She sat speaking in soothing tones to her horse as Charles gave Stacy a leg up, but she watched the two. Stacy was looking magnificent in her

black habit. She was a tall girl and appeared regal with her blond hair pinned tightly beneath her black top hat, but watching the two only brought a frown to Dawn's dark brows. There was something there she could not understand, something the two lacked, yet they seemed the best of comfortable friends. Odd that, because she liked Charles and just couldn't find it in her to like Stacy.

Stacy trotted her horse to stand beside Dawn's gelding and said, "This is very interesting . . . you knowing his lordship, I mean. How did you meet? I think Charles said something about China?"

Dawn had already been cautioned by the dowager and knew that the family preferred that no one know that it was Norington who had rescued her at sea. "Yes," said Dawn, not looking at her. "In China."

"And imagine his coming to pay you a call as soon as he returned! His clipper only docked in Southampton a few days ago." Inwardly she was envious, for she had often attempted to attract Lord Norington's attention, but he had never been inclined to her direction.

"He is quite the gentleman," said Dawn, hoping to close the subject. She urged her horse forward as though to work the fidgets out of him.

Stacy eyed her departing figure and then looked at the earl. "What say you, Charles?"

"About what, darling?"

"Is Norington interested in our little Argentine maid?"

"He could be"—Charles sighed audibly—"but it's Drake who intends to have her."

She stiffened. "Drake? What do you mean?"

"Damn if he didn't make a declaration to me yesterday. Means to have her if he can, and Stacy, it won't do!"

WILD DAWN FEVER

"It certainly will not!" She was seething. "I . . . I wasn't aware he was calling on Dawn."

"Well, he has been. Every chance he gets . . . and uses the family connection to come and go as he pleases." Charles knew what he was doing.

"How . . . how does she feel about him?"

"I don't know, it is hard to tell. She is a pet, all smiles for everyone." He frowned. "I tell you what I did notice. Seems to like Drake a bit more than is comfortable. I don't think her mother would approve."

"No, what mother would approve . . . not that he isn't haut ton, but he has been leading a rather wayward life and is not the sort to make a simple girl like Dawn happy."

"Dawn is not simple," said Charles on a note of annoyance.

"Well, but then, she isn't worldly, now, is she?"

All this while they had all been sedately trotting down the drive with Dawn only a few yards ahead of them. He looked now at her erect back, at the fine style of her horsemanship, at her face, for she had turned to give him a warm smile. "Oh, I don't know. She has seen more of the world than either of us has."

Stacy was taken aback. As far as she could remember Charles had never openly admired any other woman. He was not in the petticoat line. He had never ogled the ladies and was someone she had always been sure was totally her own. What was this new side of him? She studied him for a moment. Since Dawn's arrival on the scene, he *did* seem more . . . boyish, more spontaneous. This was not turning out to be a good morning. The news she had received about Drake and Dawn had her seething with jealousy.

This new side to Charles, well, it had her concerned. She went silent and sour.

Charles, too, was silent. He was thoughtful, about Stacy, about Drake, about Dawn, about himself. He had too many questions and not one answer. He watched as Dawn cantered down the country lane. He listened to her infectious giggle, to the sound of her voice as she spoke to her animal, and he found himself wanting to catch up to her. Good manners did not allow him to leave Stacy, who did not wish to do more than jog.

Dawn did not have the patience to put up with Stacy's moods. Charles was being formal, polite, and inhibited. She left them to their thoughts and cantered off, for she needed to run with her horse. There were so many things to learn about him. He had a manner peculiar to himself in the way he played with his bit, managed his head. She put him through his paces, testing, teaching, and became absorbed with this until she saw his head come up alertly, his ears flicker to attention. Of course, it was Norington on his dapple gray, waiting at Tandy's Well as agreed.

How he took her breath away! He sat his horse like a god, tall, proud, totally in control, and one could see that the animal beneath him needed just such a man. His top hat sat rakishly on his ginger-colored waves. The cape of his dark riding cloak blew gently round his wide shoulders. The muscles of his firm legs flexed at the sound of their approach. Faith, she thought, he was so handsome. She quieted her horse into a jog, almost blushing that he had seen her cantering toward him. What would he think? Would he think she was in a rush to reach him? Was she?

He urged his horse forward. Damn, but she was a sight. She was ravishing. His eyes swept over her body, and he

had a sudden longing to take her by the waist and lift her to him. He rode straight to her and tipped his hat, his blue eyes glinting to match his smile. "Good morning, sweetheart." His voice was soft, for her ears only. "You look good enough to eat."

She rebuked him at once, her eyebrow up, her voice frosty. "My lord!"

He laughed out loud. "That's right, love, put me in my place." And then on a more provocative note, "Do put me in my place."

"So I should, if I knew where it was," she answered glibly.

"Touché!" He reached out and tweaked her cheek. "God, you are a beauty, and you have been gone from me *too* long."

He saw the anger blaze across her face, light her violet eyes, but there was no time for her to answer his outrageous flirtation as Stacy rode up saying, "Good morning to you, my lord."

Norington had met Stacy on occasion in London. She was not in his style, but he could see that she was ready to dally with him. To what purpose he could not guess, but that it served his own design made it a certainty that she would succeed. He tipped his hat to her and advised her that she was looking enchanting as ever. He nodded toward Charles but continued to converse with Stacy as he managed his horse so that they were riding abreast.

Dawn watched them jog their horses off and allowed her horse to pace himself beside Charles's bay gelding. She didn't trust herself to speak for a moment as she watched Steele flirt with Stacy, but then she gathered her wits. She would not allow Steele to find her jealous. Oh, no, not

she! She turned to Charles and smiled sweetly. "You, sir, have been quiet all the morning. Is something wrong?"

He returned her smile. "How could there be? It is a lovely winter's day with little to complain of—"

"Yet, you feel like complaining," she stated, and giggled. "So do I."

"Do you? Why, Dawn?" He reached out and touched her arm with sure affection.

"Oh, I don't know. Never mind. I am just a woman and given to moods. Besides, I am getting old, you know." She changed the subject abruptly.

"So you are!" He laughed. "You will soon be one and twenty, and I mean to throw you a ball that will set the town on their ears!"

"No, Charles, please do not. I would not like it at all," she answered gravely.

"Wouldn't you?" He frowned. "It is done, you know."

"Perhaps . . . when my parents join me in England next year, but for the time being, I would rather not have one."

As this fit in with his plans, he did not argue the point. There could be no advantage in having her displayed for the bachelors of England. He reached over and took up her chin and gently kissed her cheek.

His timing was perfect, for it was at this moment that Lord Norington paused in his flirtation with Stacy to look back and ask which turn they should take.

Steele's blue eyes raked Dawn as she blushed furiously, and he held his horse in check purposely until Dawn and Charles had caught up. He then wielded his steed so that Charles and Stacy rode ahead while he lagged behind with a quiet Dawn.

WILD DAWN FEVER

"That was very touching," he said sarcastically.

"What was?" she answered on a defiant note.

"Tell me, do you mean to have him, or are you only spreading your wings a little further?"

Her chin went up. "That was uncalled for and, I think, just a bit beneath you. Need I answer?"

He softened. "Shall I apologize?"

"No. What do you wish to know? If I mean to wed Charles? No, how can I? He is engaged to Stacy. Do you want to know if I am free with my favors? No. You have been the only one . . . but that doesn't mean forever."

He looked at her long, for he wanted her. Hotly he wanted her. Right then he wanted her. He said instead, "Why did you leave me so abruptly in China? Why did you run away?"

"I told you in my note," she said softly. "And I don't wish to speak of it again." She looked at him fully then and said, "Steele, I gave myself to you at a time when I was particularly vulnerable, and you were my vision of the ideal man. I was a girl infatuated. Now I am a woman."

"And the woman is no longer infatuated?" Damn it to hell! Why was he asking this? He didn't want to get into this. He was impatient with himself, irritated by her aloofness.

"The woman is no longer vulnerable," she answered easily, and then with supreme effort she smiled.

"Fence!" Charles called as he took his horse in stride and gave Stacy a lead over its height.

Dawn surveyed it in the distance and guessed that it was lower than it looked, but it did look imposing. It had been quite some time since she had taken any fences, and the horse beneath her was new and untried. Her concern must

have been obvious, for Steele looked at her and commanded on a firm note, "Shorten your reins, woman, and wake him up with your stick!"

She responded at once and gave her horse a tap to the rump, which brought his ears up alertly. She watched as Steele took his dapple gray in hand and executed the post and rail in fine style. She sucked in air and went for the fence. Her form was fine, her hands were fine, and her legs were firmly in place; but Perversity was young, he was in new and frightening lands, and the fence he was fast approaching seemed a terrifying thing. He took her right to the fence and put on his brakes as hard as he could, which very nearly made him go into a sitting position. It was a wonder that Dawn did not go off. However, she had been ready for his refusal and had sat her saddle deep and firm.

Dawn felt the color flood her cheeks, and she wished she were almost anywhere else in the world, so acute was her embarrassment. However, this was not the time to give in to such feelings. Perversity had to be dealt with. She punished him by taking him up to the fence and severely reprimanding him with her voice and a slap on his rump. It was necessary that he respect his mistress's wishes above his fears.

Steele sat his prancing dapple gray and watched her with admiration. He liked the way she kept her head; remained cool and collected. He liked the manner in which she handled her young horse, chastising without breaking his spirit. She gave him just enough of a reprimand before pacing him out to the fence.

"Good girl!" He could not help but encourage her as

she took her young gelding in hand and cantered him over the fence in fine form.

Charles and Stacy had by this time returned to watch Dawn land with her steed. Perversity was proud of his feat and displayed this by stepping high and throwing his head. Dawn laughed, patted him, and turned a beaming face to Steele. "There! He was only frightened, you see; he'll do."

"He certainly shall. He shows promise," agreed Steele. "Is he from Charles's stables?"

"No," answered Charles. "She wanted her own horse. We are dealing with a very independent miss here, you know."

"Speaking of my independence," put in Dawn, suddenly changing the subject to one that was on her mind, "when, dearest Charles, do you mean to allow me to move into Windy Towers?"

"Now, Dawn, we have discussed this, and you know how I feel." He shook his head. "If your parents were here . . . if they had written that they wanted you installed there . . . well, then I suppose you would leave me no choice but to let you go. That, however, is not the case." Then in a voice touched by pique, "Aren't you happy at Stafford House with me?"

"Oh, Charles, it is not that at all, as you well know." She smiled sweetly at him. "It is just that . . . Aunt Gussie wanted me to have Windy Towers, and I do feel it is time for me to take up residence there and perhaps see to its management."

"Ah, you don't trust my judgment, then?"

"How so?" she returned in some surprise.

"Since I am the one who assigned the agent who sees to

Windy Towers's careful management, I must take it that you don't feel me adequate to the task." Clearly he was indicating his displeasure.

She had the upbringing to deal with this sort of situation, for she had been the eldest child, and her father had taught her well. She had both firmness and diplomacy at hand. "Ah, so you see how we can misjudge each other."

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"I have been thinking that you have a poor notion of me, for you have not felt me adequate to the task of running *my own* affairs." It was gently said, but she gave every indication that she would have her way.

Charles's brows went up with quick understanding. Here was a girl who knew her own mind and meant to carry out her intention of taking over Augusta Stafford's estates. Well, well, this was something he had not bargained for at all. She was, of course, of age. He could not stop her from leaving the protection of his home, yet he made one more attempt. "Dawn . . . there is a certain impropriety attached to a young maid's taking up residence alone in such a large establishment."

"Oh, I am certain of that; however, I won't be alone. Sarah said it would give her the greatest of pleasure to stay on indefinitely with me at Windy Towers." Dawn disliked being told what to do, but she maintained a pleasant exterior, telling herself this was Charles, who was only concerned for her welfare.

Throughout this conversation Steele and Stacy both remained quiet, Stacy because she wanted to read Charles, know what he was about. Could it be that he was benefiting from running Windy Towers? How very clever of him. No wonder he was so attentive to the Cesares girl.

WILD DAWN FEVER

Steele silently applauded Dawn. She had her wits and a sure style. He liked her address, he liked her firmness, and he silently agreed that she should have the handling of her own inheritance. If her parents had trusted her to sail all this way to see to the estates in question, it was not for Charles to stand in her way. There was something disturbing about all this as well. Was Charles's interest purely out of concern for Dawn, or did it stem from self-aggrandizement?

Chapter Five

T rue to his word, Charles led them to the Manor Tea House, which proved to be a charming little inn whose public room housed an inviting fireplace. Luncheon was made enjoyable by the gentlemen, who set out to amuse the ladies with their ready wit. During this time Steele was careful not to flirt to any degree with Dawn, and to all outward appearances he seemed only mildly interested in the girl. He did not want either Stacy or Charles to think him in any way romantically involved with Dawn. Oh, no, that was a trap he meant to stay well out for certain. He did, however, get a few moments alone with Dawn, but this was only by chance.

They had finished their lunch, when at Charles's suggestion, they settled their bill and made their way across the cobbled courtyard to the stables to fetch their horses. It was at this time that both Stacy and Charles were called by a young couple just alighting from their carriage. Stacy squealed with delight and took Charles in tow. Quickly, before Charles could turn to include them, Steele took

WILD DAWN FEVER

Dawn's arm and hurried her along to the side of the inn where they would be out of view.

"What . . . what are you doing?" Dawn was nearly out of breath and had to reach up to adjust her top hat as well.

He took the moment, for he was ever the opportunist, and his arms went around her, pressing her close as he whispered, "What do you think?"

Dawn could feel her heart pounding, beating against her chest, as her knees buckled under her. She felt her head was spinning, and there was an explosion of light going off in her mind. How good it was to be in his arms, to feel the hardness of his lean body against her own, to feel the magic of his hands. What was she doing? Ineffectually she put up a gloved hand to his shoulder and pushed at him, but his kiss had developed into another, and his tongue was teasing her to remember things better left forgotten.

All at once she drew on herself and stopped him, pulling away as she cried, "No . . . Steele . . . this isn't fair!"

"*Fair?* What has that word got to do with this; with us?"

"What you want . . . is to have me and be free. What I want . . . isn't the same." It was said in a small voice, because it hurt to hear the words out loud. It hurt because he would not refute them.

He could hear Charles calling her name. He had to get her into the open. He had to make this encounter appear innocent. Hurriedly he took her arm and guided her to the rear of the stables where there was a turf paddock and another opening into the barn. He guided her silently into the building and through it to its front entrance.

"Here . . ." he called to Charles as he stepped through, Dawn just at his back. He turned to her and said softly,

"Your answers and mine are too far apart, but I do *want* you, sweetheart."

She had collected herself enough to respond with composure. "That is something, isn't it? You see, I don't know what *I* want!" There was no time for more; Charles and Stacy were upon them.

Dawn saw and heard no more of Steele Norington in the days that followed, and she thanked the fates who kept her busy with her plans to move into Windy Towers. She had already been introduced to her late great-aunt's efficient household staff, but there were the tenant farmers to visit and get to know. There was the agent, Mr. Holly, who Charles had installed at the estate. She found she did not like Mr. Holly and was surprised by Charles's choice. She spent an entire day with the gruff little man, going over books and riding over the country that Windy Towers claimed as its own. When she came away from him, she knew that this was not someone she would keep on, but here was a problem, for she did not wish to insult Charles. She consulted with the dowager.

"It is something of a muddle . . ." she was saying almost to herself when the dowager remained silent on the subject for a moment.

"I am beginning to wonder, child, if we should not send for your parents . . . your father at least?" The dowager was frowning.

"But why?" This was unexpected, for all along Lady Amherst had been enthusiastic about Dawn's taking up residence in her new home.

"Some things don't jibe and . . . I don't know . . . it's too smoky by far. . . ." answered Sarah enigmatically.

WILD DAWN FEVER

"Sarah . . . what can you mean?"

"Always liked Charles, but he is flawed, you know," said Sarah by way of an answer.

"Aren't we all?" Dawn laughed.

"Tch, tch, child. Mind me," returned the dowager testily. "I didn't get to be my age without learning a thing or two."

"The wonder is that you haven't learned more," teased Dawn, touching the dowager's shoulder. Her hand was firmly held and squeezed.

"The wonder is that I find you adorable, brat!" snapped Lady Amherst. "But as to Charles, he is ambitious . . . which is sometimes a good thing, but I am beginning to think he may be a touch too ambitious, and that could be . . . dangerous." She said this last slowly.

"Dangerous? Charles? Oh, Sarah, what gammon is this?" Clearly Dawn was shocked by this line of conversation. She held Charles in high esteem and some affection.

"Ah, you do not see," said the dowager, and sighed. "Never mind." She picked up a list of supplies and waved it at her charge. "Here, take this to Charles, and see to it that these things are purchased and delivered to Windy Towers for us. Also, plan on making another trip into London, for I should think you will need carriage horses. Gussie was a love, but she didn't know the first thing about horseflesh, and from what we saw of her stables, you will need to do some shopping in that department."

"Ah, you trust Charles to aid me in that regard?" Dawn's brow was up, and the banter was in her tone.

"Oh, yes, child, for all the world will know he had his hand in it, and therefore he must do himself proud, mustn't he?" She had a definite smirk on her face.

"You are incorrigible, my dearest Sarah." Dawn shook

her head but took the list and made her way downstairs to a small anteroom Charles used as his study.

He was closeted there all morning with his books and ledgers, and timidly Dawn opened the door to find him seated behind his massive Gothic desk. There was but one window at his back, where the sun was now streaming through. A black iron stove gave off ample heat, but there was something oppressive in the room's design. Charles looked up, saw Dawn, and though he smiled, he quickly put away a long piece of paper that Dawn recognized as a bill of lading.

"Hallo . . ." she said lightly. "Have I got you at a bad time? Shall I go away?"

"No. Come in here, and give me rest from these ledgers." He was smiling.

She walked in and put the dowager's list on the desk.

"Sarah says she must have these things." There was a giggle behind the words that he found infectious. He got up from his desk, leaving the list behind and went to her. "Ah, and so there is no talking you out of this move. Sarah has won."

Dawn wrinkled her brow. "Now, I don't understand what that is supposed to mean?"

"I have seen how thrilled the dowager is to be taking charge of you and Windy Towers. It gives her something more to do."

"Oh, Charles, such an accusation is beneath you," answered Dawn quietly.

He took her shoulders. "You don't know me, then!" It was almost a growl as he bent to kiss her. His lips on hers were more brutal than they were passionate. His touch was

rougher than it was tender, and his mood angry more than loving.

Dawn felt herself repelled by the force of his embrace, frightened by the feelings he had suddenly unleashed upon her, and yet capable of handling him and the moment. She was not the girl she once had been. She did not break from his hold, but she did manage to gently pull away from his mouth and say softly, "Charles . . . ?" with enough of a question to bring him back to his sense of propriety.

He released her, making a show of dropping his hands, and he said, his face a mask of apology, "I have wanted to do that for so long. . . ." and then he added in a whisper, "Dawn . . . haven't you guessed how I feel about you?"

"No. I thought we were friends."

"It is a good beginning, friendship," he answered.

To cut the subject short, she dived to the point. "Charles, you are engaged to marry Stacy."

"A problem, I know, but engagements can be broken. . . ." he offered.

She was shocked. "Charles! Yours and Stacy's is of long standing. You posted the banns. . . . Charles, this is wrong."

"Wrong? No, the only wrong would be if I married Stacy when I want you. . . ."

"Charles," she said assuagingly, "do you know what this is? Temporary infatuation, that is all. It will pass."

He took up her shoulders again. "No . . . I know I was premature; I should not have broached the subject to you yet; you are too innocent, but trust me, I will handle everything. Stacy, Windy Towers, everything!"

"Trust you? No, I think not after today's work, I can't. You see, I am fairly certain that Stacy already does, and as

to you handling everything, well, you may do so on Stacy's behalf, but not on mine." She turned to leave him.

He held her arm. "You are upset. . . . Dawn, stay, please. Don't leave on this note."

She smiled at him. "Charles, I will forget what just passed, and we may remain friends, but I am leaving for Windy Towers in the morning. It is what my aunt Gussie wished me to do, and what is more, it is what I wish to do, very much. I hope you will stand my friend in this."

He sighed out loud and patted her hand before he released her arm altogether. "Yes, of course, you may always count on me."

"Thank you," she said, and once again started to leave.

He stopped her at the door, calling quietly, "Dawn? Forgive me." There was a genuine look of regret that hung about his head.

She smiled sweetly at him. "There is nothing to forgive." With which she made her escape. Oh, faith, what she needed was a ride, and *not* sidesaddle. She would don her riding habit and her long boots, go down to the stables, saddle up her gelding, and ride him astride across the fields.

Chapter Six

*P*erversity's ears flicked alertly to his mistress's words. She wanted something of him. He felt her legs tighten at his flanks, he felt her weight shift forward, and he looked ahead and saw that she meant to jump him over the post and rail line fence into the open field. It seemed high to him, and he backed off, his head well up. She laughed out loud and chided him, "Afraid, boy? No, you couldn't be. Come on, we'll do it together." She spurred him forward and reminded him with a tap of her stick to his rump that his job was to obey. He responded to the command and took on speed. She harnessed the speed so that he was collected beneath her and ready to spring, and he did; in fine form he took his fence and landed lightly on the other side.

Dawn laughed and gave him rein, for he wanted to run, and she wanted to let him, but their pace was short-lived. Ahead she could see a rider, and he was waving her to a halt. Who? She appraised the man quickly, and from the

style of his clothing she knew it was Drake, Drake Stafford, and she was not at all sure she was pleased to bump into him alone. There was nothing for it, though, and she reined in her horse as she approached him.

"Zounds, but what a beauty you are!" Drake ejaculated as he tipped his hat to her. "Just look at you, riding astride, flaunting convention, and doing it in magnificent style!"

She inclined her head. "Thank you. It is nice to know that someone in England does not hold me in disapprobation for it."

"What is this?" he answered gallantly. "How could I find fault in anything *you* chose to do?" He shook his head. "Nonsense, you go on being your own woman."

"Hmmm. That is what Lady Amherst says."

"What is?" He smiled.

"In famous form, she told me that I must ride and be as I am, and that sooner or later I will be accepted by the haut ton because I have the position and the money to carry it off." Dawn sighed with fond appreciation for the dowager. "She is a jewel."

"Ah, and I take it you find that Charles is not," he put in quizzically.

She turned her head sharply at that. "Hold just a moment, Drake. You must not think that. Charles is a dear and has been wonderful to me."

"Of course he has, but my staid cousin Charles does disapprove of your riding alone and astride, does he not?"

"Well, yes . . . but he does not forbid it," she answered cautiously.

"As to that, he doesn't have the right to forbid you anything, now, does he? After all, he is not your guardian."

WILD DAWN FEVER

She changed the subject and pointed to a stretch of field lined with tall pines. "Look . . ." she said, ". . . isn't that lovely?"

He looked instead at her. "Very," he said meaningfully.

She appraised him openly. Yes, he was attractive with his fair hair fringing his forehead beneath the tilt of his top hat, and yes, there was something sensual about him that was most appealing, but . . . but, what? It was a silent question she couldn't answer. Again she changed the subject.

"You will come to see us when we have moved into Windy Towers, I hope."

He didn't answer at once, and there was a certain frown that took over his features and surprised Dawn. When he did answer, it was slowly. "You know, Dawn, I have to say at the outset that on this point Charles may be correct in his advice to you."

Her brow went up warningly. "Really, do you think so?"

He laughed. "Oh, don't get your back up. If moving into Windy Towers is something you have your heart set on, then I must support you in your madness."

"In my madness?" she nearly shrieked, her back well up.

"Lord, girl, you are exquisite when aroused," he countered, hoping to soften her. This was not a subject she would take to easily.

She calmed herself. "I don't understand why you think it madness for me to move into my own home with the dowager Sarah Amherst riding roughshod over all?"

"Because you are still two women alone."

"With a household full of servants," she returned frostily.

"As you say." He decided to give it up. He and Charles

had discussed the issue, and he had said he would try to dissuade her, but he could see all he was doing was creating a rift between them. If her mind was made up to it, so be it. They were turning down the wooded lane that would take them back to the Stafford House stables, and Dawn said lightly, "Drake, you needn't return with me. I will be all right."

"Ah, I have offended you," he said sadly.

She smiled. "No such thing. I just don't wish you to go out of your way."

"My way is anywhere you are headed," he returned quickly.

Too quickly for her liking. He never seemed sincere. However, she smiled. "In that case, I mean to ride!" With which she started off, urging her horse into a healthy canter. She was tired of being told what to do. She was tired of being the object of all this wearisome gallantry, and at the moment she was tired of both Charles and Drake.

He caught up to her as the path took on a sharp right bend, and they both slowed, for they were approaching the rear paddock of the stables. He reached out and held her arm for a moment as they walked their horses. "Dawn, don't be angry with me."

She smiled. "I'm not." She looked at him more kindly. "Are you coming up to the house?"

"Yes, in fact, I have a meeting with Charles."

She was surprised into asking, "A meeting? What sort of meeting?"

He realized too late that he had allowed himself to use the wrong choice of words. "Ah, Charles is forever helping me with business advice."

"Oh" was all that Dawn could answer to this. The

WILD DAWN FEVER

notion of Charles and Drake having a meeting of any sort was a most startling one. They had always given her the impression of disliking each other. How very odd, she thought. How very odd, indeed. And then she remembered again what her mother had said about the present Earl of Redcliff: "Charles is not what he seems, darling. He is pleasant and charming and the kind of man I do not wish you to become too friendly with; understood?" At the time she had answered her mother in a vague affirmative, but now these words were recalled vividly.

Opium was a painkiller, and originally it was used to combat dysentery, but opium smoking was a habit that was hazardous to mind and body. Knowing this, England still continued to pour opium into China in order to balance her budget of tea importation.

Steele's arguments in the House of Lords were politely received and just as politely ignored. The men in Parliament did not believe that China's government would actually declare war on England to stop the opium. They argued with Steele, telling him that all the tonnage England took from China in tea had to be balanced, and opium was their answer.

In something of a temper, Steele made his way to his club, White's, where he was greeted by friends and allowed to cool down. He sat back and smiled at the light-headed conversation going on around him as he sipped his brandy, until something caught his attention, and he stiffened in his chair.

"Is that so?" It was Drake Stafford's voice. "Are you saying that it can be eaten? I am surprised. I was under the

impression that it was something one could only use as snuff . . . or in one's pipe."

"No, no, Drake, ole boy." It was Petersham, who was considered to be quite knowledgeable on the subject of snuff, tea, and, it would appear, opium as well.

"And the effects? Are they the same?" Drake pursued the subject.

"Quite. The user will have a euphoric sense of himself, after which he will probably doze off."

"How long would it take before one became addicted to the drug?"

"Oh . . . if eaten . . . hmmm," pondered Petersham. "That is difficult to say. It has been my observation that one pipe smoked daily for two weeks will leave a man in the grip of addiction."

"This is all very interesting," said Drake, lifting his bumper of ale to his lips.

"Ah, not thinking of indulging are you, Drake, lad?" asked Petersham, frowning his disapproval.

"No, my lord. However, I do have a friend who has done so, and it is my intention to discourage him with the facts at my disposal."

"I see. I see," returned Petersham.

Steele had to restrain himself from turning around, but retained his slouched position, his feet on the low table in front of him. Why this conversation should catch his interest and concern, he could not understand, but that it had was certainly true. He was most disturbed by it. What had Drake to do with the use of opium? He did not believe for one moment that Drake intended to interfere with a friend's taking of the drug. Drake was not that sort of man.

A few moments later he could see out of the corner of

WILD DAWN FEVER

his eye that Drake had taken his leave of Petersham and was making his way to the doors. Steele put down his glass and bade his friends good day. It was time he left London and returned to the New Forest. Why? Why, be damned. It was time.

Chapter Seven

Windy Towers was a mystical construction of turrets, towers, and soldier walks that dated back to the 1200s. All this had been renovated and remodeled, dismantled, and altered, until it stood in its present stage, an architectural fantasy of many generations. Its body was freshly painted in soft ivory lines; its various roofs were a deep sky blue; and its new Georgian lines dominated a good portion of the building, for Dawn's late great-aunt Augusta had done some renovating of her own.

Dawn had always loved Windy Towers, and the times she had spent there with her late great-aunt. She went through the rooms now, touching familiar objects of art, smiling at all the old, sweet memories. She did find it odd, however, that most of the servants had been replaced. She had not yet found one servant she could remember, and upon inquiry she discovered that the butler, the housekeeper, and the cook had all been installed by Charles. This was something she would have to look into, espe-

WILD DAWN FEVER

cially in regards to Travers. He had been her great-aunt's butler, antiquated, but efficient, haughty, and loyal, and it worried Dawn that he was no longer there. Was he well? Had he retired?

A housemaid, small, young, and nervous, bobbed into the hall as Dawn made her way down its length toward the library.

"Excuse me . . ." Dawn called her attention.

The girl stopped, dropped a curtsy, and waited anxiously. "Yes, miss?"

"What is your name?" Dawn smiled to ease the girl's tension.

"Molly, miss."

"Ah, Molly, of course. I should have remembered—you were introduced to me as part of the staff, but it usually takes me awhile to remember names. I hope you will forgive me." Then, not waiting for an answer, she dived in. "Molly, can you tell me what happened to Travers?"

The girl's cheeks were pale to begin with, but Dawn's violet eyes widened, for she was sure the girl lost color. "Travers, miss?"

"Yes, my late aunt's butler, Travers."

"Uh, um, well, I think he retired on the pension your aunt left him. Aye, that's it."

"Oh, then, he is well?" Dawn pursued.

"Aye, as far as oi know, he is."

"And living near here, is he?"

"Oi don't know that, miss. His lordship might be knowing."

"His lordship? You mean the earl?"

"Aye. He . . . he let everyone go, he did. . . ." She bit her lip as though afraid that she had said too much.

"Are you suggesting that Travers did not wish to retire?"

"Oi don't know . . . oh, please, miss . . . oi don't want no trouble, and oi need this job, oi do."

"You shan't lose it, Molly. In fact, Lady Sarah has been telling me it is time I hired a personal maid . . . what do you think? Would you like to take care of me instead of a dust mop?"

The girl's countenance underwent a complete change. A smile transformed her features as she began bobbing a series of curtsies.

"Oh, miss, oi would that! Oh . . . do ye mean it, then? But, lordy, oi don't know if oi can please ye . . . ?"

"I think you can, Molly, and the first thing you may do is to get acquainted with my luggage. I am afraid I have never been very good at packing, and you will find my gowns in need of attention."

"Oh, miss; oh miss," said Molly, thrilled with the prospect. "Oi'll do that right now, oi will!" And off she went.

Dawn smiled to herself and proceeded to do a tour of the house. However, not more than ten minutes elapsed when she looked up from the writing desk in the library to find a stout, rather prim-looking woman, whom she recognized as the housekeeper, Mrs. Epsom, coming toward her. Her brow went up, for there was an air of disapproval about the woman that Dawn sensed was directed toward herself. Now just what was this?

"Miss Cesares?" Mrs. Epsom began.

Dawn adopted her duchess look, for she did not like Mrs. Epsom. "Yes?"

WILD DAWN FEVER

“There is a matter that I must discuss with you.”

Dawn had been bred to handle the position of lady of the manor, and she knew well how to do this. The housekeeper's bold manner and presumption set her immediately on guard. Mrs. Epsom had not, as was commonly courteous, excused herself for the interruption, and it was obvious that Dawn was occupied with quill and paper. Mrs. Epsom took on a superior attitude, and this, too, set Dawn on edge. Her brow was up when she answered the housekeeper with one haughty-toned word, “Oh?” There was a warning in the sound.

Mrs. Epsom did not heed the warning because she did not see Dawn as her mistress. She had been hired by the Earl of Redcliff. She took her orders from the earl, and as far as he had indicated, that was what she was supposed to continue to do whether or not Miss Cesares was in residence. After all, Mrs. Epsom was not about to take orders from a snip of a girl who was only half-English.

“Indeed!” answered Mrs. Epsom. “I found Molly upstairs in your room going through your luggage. I dismissed her immediately.”

“You what?” Dawn schooled her temper and said in a grave voice, “Then, you will immediately find her and reinstall her in my room, attending to my luggage!”

“As it happens, she would not remove herself from your chambers. She advised me . . . and in the rudest manner imaginable, that she was hired as your personal maid by you and that she only took her orders from *you*!”

“Right she is,” said Dawn with a smile, and then in a tone that dismissed both subject and housekeeper, “I see no problem, Mrs. Epsom.”

The housekeeper bristled visibly, and her thin lips pursed. "Well, as to that, I must tell you, Miss Cesares, that Molly is unsuited to the position you have raised her to handle. I should like to have her replaced with someone I interviewed only yesterday morning."

"No, Mrs. Epsom." Dawn's brows were up, and there was a martial glint in her violet eyes.

"Miss Cesares, the earl hired me as housekeeper, which means that it is my function to run the smooth doings of this household. I cannot do that unless the staff is answerable to me."

"Ah, herein lies the problem. I was bred to handle the smooth running of an estate much larger, in fact, than this, and therefore, Mrs. Epsom, I expect the staff, including *yourself*, to be answerable to me."

"Well," returned Mrs. Epsom in a huff. "I don't know what the earl will say to this!"

"Tell me, Mrs. Epsom," said Dawn slowly as she studied the woman's face for a reaction. "Do you feel obliged to report *my* business to the earl?"

"Well, of course; after all . . ."

"I see." Dawn sighed. "I am very sorry, Mrs. Epsom, but I find that I do not need a housekeeper after all. You will receive one month's wages, and you may remain here until you find another post."

The housekeeper's temper was ruffled severely, and she was taken aback for the moment. It had never occurred to her that the young woman could utilize such sternness. She had been in the wrong, but that was not how she saw it. She squared herself and replied on a vulgar note, "That suits me fine, missy! I wouldn't be working and taking orders from the likes of you, anyway, and what's more,

WILD DAWN FEVER

I'll take my month's ready, all right, but I won't be staying here, no, I won't!"

"You are probably wise in that decision," said Dawn on a hard note.

The housekeeper turned and grumbled loudly as she left the room, "Umph! Foreigners!"

Dawn stood for a long moment, somewhat surprised, for she had never considered herself a foreigner. How odd that anyone should say so. Yes, her father was Argentine . . . though he, too, was half-English; perhaps that was why she had always thought herself more English than anything else. Was that how Steele thought? Did he think of her as a foreigner not enough of the English lady for his wife? This was a depressing thought indeed. It put that much more weight against her in the battle to win his heart and hand.

His lordship, Steele Norington, was a man who did what he wished whenever possible. That it was not in keeping with his basic decision not to get involved with Dawn Cesares, had nothing to do with the fact that he now traveled determinedly to get to her. It was enough that at the moment, that was what he wanted—to see her, to talk to her, to . . . never mind, see her, he would.

He jumped out of his chocolate-brown carriage and sent his driver to his stables with the order to have his dapple saddled and brought front and center. His driver rolled his eyes when he was out of sight. They had just taken a two-and-one-half hour trip from London, and now his lordship was off again, but then, such was the man.

Steele shot upstairs with a clipped order to his valet to

prepare his riding clothes and hurriedly bathed. Damn, but it was getting late. He guessed he wouldn't get to Windy Towers before five o'clock. He grinned to himself; never mind, it would be just in time for high tea, and she couldn't deny him that, now, could she? What would Lady Amherst say? Again he grinned, for the dowager was a friend and something of an imp in her own right. She wouldn't mind the intrusion; besides he wanted to have a word with her alone.

It was, in fact, just a few minutes before five in the afternoon as the Windy Towers butler took Steele's great-coat, hat, and gloves. He motioned to the ornate, blue satin upholstered sofa in the central hall and advised Lord Norington that he would see if "Miss" was receiving.

This immediately caused Steele to bristle, but he controlled himself. Very proper that her servant should hold all unannounced guests in abeyance. However, he was not used to such treatment. As it happened, the earl had just left Lady Amherst and Dawn in the library, and though he passed the butler in the hall, he proceeded to the central hall without realizing that Steele was pacing there.

It was therefore with surprise that Charles greeted his lordship, Norington, "Why, Steele?"

His lordship smiled benignly at the earl. He could see that Charles did not approve of his presence at Windy Towers. Why? Was it the hour of his visit that disturbed him? Was it something else?

"Hallo, Charles. How are you?"

"I am fine." He frowned. "Is there something . . . I can do for you?"

"I am afraid not." Steele maintained his composure, not yet irritated enough to allow his temper reign.

WILD DAWN FEVER

"Then, you are here to see Lady Amherst perhaps?" Charles pursued.

"Is that a question, Charles?" Steele's brow was up warningly. Clearly he felt that the earl was overstepping. It was none of Charles's business what he was doing at Windy Towers.

"Is there any reason you are reluctant to answer it?" Charles shot back at him.

"Every reason in the world," said Steele in mock gentleness.

"Oh?" Charles would not let it go. "Would you care to elaborate?"

The butler returned and quietly said that Miss Cesares would see his lordship in the library; the butler turned, and, expecting that his lordship would follow, began once again in that direction.

"Perhaps one day, I shall . . . but for now, there isn't the time." Steel smiled wickedly and proceeded on his way.

Charles stood in something of a state of agitation. He had taken his leave of the ladies, who knew he was engaged to escort Stacy to London to meet with her father. He had said that he wished he had more time. To return to the library now just to monitor Steele's visit would make him look foolish, and he had no wish to appear in this light. He had no choice but to proceed on his way.

This encounter had left Steele both amused and curious, but there was no time to delve into its meaning. He stood in the quaintly styled yellow room and saw only Dawn. She was clothed in a soft shade of violet velvet that fit her figure alluringly. Her shining black hair was dressed in

ringlets all around her pert countenance, and her violet eyes sparkled across the room at him. Damn, but she was beautiful!

It was Lady Amherst who spoke first, and with an air of having discovered a secret. She had for some time suspected Dawn of having a *tendre* for Steele. This had been a feeling she experienced when she listened to Dawn speak about him, when she watched Dawn in his presence. When she saw the two now, looking at each other in *such* a way, why, it was as though they were touching. She liked Norington, but until now he had been a confirmed bachelor. However, perhaps he had met a match in Dawn Cesares? She said with the hint of a mischievous smile, "Well, well, scamp! When did you return from London? I rather thought you would be raking a storm tonight to forget your misery."

"And you were sure I would be miserable?" he returned, his brow up quizzically. He was bending over her outstretched hand.

"Help me to my feet, rogue," she answered in return, consuming his full attention whether he wished it or no. When she was standing, she answered him lightly, "I don't take you for a fool, Steele. Tell me you really believed they would not vote you down?"

He sighed. "No . . . I knew, but there is no wisdom in it. China means to stop the importation of opium, even if they have to go to war with us to do it. How, then, can it help our economy to go to war?"

"And what do they say in the House of Lords to that?" she asked, though she fancied she knew the answer.

"You know exactly what they said," he responded on a

WILD DAWN FEVER

note of asperity. " 'War? Never. China can't afford to go to war with our great nation.' They don't understand that the Chinese consider us barbarians."

She sighed. "Well, I wish that boy of mine would collect his wife and come home."

Steele had forgotten that Lord Amherst, Sarah's son, was still in Canton. He patted her shoulder. "Now, Amherst is a bright fellow. He will take the first ship out of Canton at the slightest hint of trouble."

"Yes, so he will," said the dowager, and then to Dawn, who had been standing silently and listening to their exchange, "Dearest child, please do excuse me. I find that I am fatigued after Charles's visit. He is at times most tiring. I think I can trust Steele to behave with you for the *short* time he will be here." She knew just how to control the youths in her charge. She sighed heavily, for she loved the part she had chosen to play and decided to enact it well. "I am going to go to my room and have a nap before the Dewey arrives with that son she wants you to have. I am sorry she tricked me into inviting them for dinner." She moved toward the library door and then with a meaningful look at Steele, "Poor darling, they mean to have her married before ever she has enjoyed her single state at Windy Towers." She opened the door, and then again turned to the two still watching her now in some awe. "I shall have tea sent in to you." This was an additional reminder that they would not be alone for very long, that the two would soon be interrupted by a servant. Dawn smiled to herself, and wondering just what the Lady Amherst was about, she looked up and across at Steele. Faith, but he took her breath away. He looked so handsome, so

wonderful, so self-assured. That's right, he thinks all he has to do is smile at you . . . and he hasn't even said good afternoon yet!

Steele moved across the room. He had wanted to have private speech with Lady Amherst, but, obviously that was something that would have to wait. Hell! Looking at Dawn now, he only knew he wanted her in his arms. There was something about her that stirred him. He told himself it was the memory of their time together, the memory of their passion, but already his manhood was stirring. He looked deep into her violet eyes and said softly as he reached and took up her hand, "Ah, Dawn, you look a jewel in your violet gown. It suits you."

His kiss was light as his lips brushed her wrist, but it set her pulse rate up ten beats. She wanted to yield to him, and it must have showed in her eyes for all at once he was taking her into his arms, and his mouth was closing on hers.

His lips parted her own, and his tongue gently reminded her of all past intimacies. His embrace was strong, and she thought then that it was a good thing, for she knew the floor beneath her feet to be an unsteady thing. She held to him for support, and someone inside of her was returning his kiss, for she wasn't; she knew better, didn't she?

His hand moved from her back and found her breast, cupping it before his finger teased her already pert nipple, and then suddenly he set her away, his head moving only slightly to indicate the door at his back.

"So, my sweetheart, how do you like being mistress of Windy Towers?" It was idle conversation as a serving girl came in with a tea tray and quietly set it on the coffee table.

WILD DAWN FEVER

Dawn marveled. How could he make love to her one minute and the very next behave as though nothing had happened? How had he heard anyone coming? She hadn't. She had been too absorbed by his kiss, by his touch, to hear anything but the sound of their passion. At the thought her cheeks took on color. He saw it and laughed, flicking her nose and saying softly as the serving girl left them alone once more, "Why are you blushing, love?"

"I am not," she said hotly.

"Innocent," he said, and smiled as he proceeded to change the subject. "So, here only one day, and already you will be entertaining for dinner?"

"Yes, Lady Dewey and her dreadful son." Dawn grimaced and as he laughed, she smiled ruefully at him. "They called on us this morning and tricked Sarah into the invitation."

"Tricked Sarah? Never." He shook his head. "It serves Sarah's game to have them here."

"Why? We were going to have a nice quiet dinner with only Drake coming, as Charles and Stacy are expected in London. . . ."

"Are you telling me that Drake was to be your first dinner guest?" He was frowning.

"Yes. I invited him to dine with us some days ago." She wrinkled her nose. "I don't think Sarah likes him."

"No, I can't imagine she would," he said dryly.

"Don't you like Drake?" She was curious.

"Not especially. In spite of his good name, he is a skirter, and what's more, Sarah was very right to invite additional guests. It doesn't look right having only Drake—"

"Doesn't look right? He is something of a cousin, you know," she returned, her chin going up.

"And a suitor!" his lordship was quick to riposte.

"And what is wrong with that?" she answered testily.

"Don't you know? You can't be stupid enough to think he is anything but a fortune hunter?"

This particular suspicion had more than once come to her mind; however, she was not about to allow him such license. "Oh, do you mean to tell me that Drake couldn't find something in me to love?"

"I am telling you that he isn't capable of the 'finer' feeling," he returned sharply, acidly, and then more seriously, "And I am slighted, you see."

She frowned. What game was he at now? "Slighted?"

"That you did not see fit to invite *me* to your first dinner party."

She was surprised by this, and immediately replied, "But . . . of course you are welcome."

"Then, I shall see you tonight, for I think I have stayed long enough to raise Sarah's brow."

"But your tea?"

"I didn't come to have tea, sweetheart." His tone was low, seductive, and brought the color back to her cheeks. He took up her hand and then murmured low under his breath "Oh damn!" as he then drew her into his arms for another kiss. It was a gentle thing, an until-later thing, but it managed to set them both on fire. He was made of a strong will, and the next moment had him at the door, stopping only to say "I suppose country hours . . .?"

"No, no, we dine at eight o'clock, Sarah insisted."

"Till later then, love." And he was off.

Dawn stood for a long moment. What was all this? Did he not want her to marry? He didn't want to marry her

WILD DAWN FEVER

himself, but then, he didn't want anyone else to have her, either. Or perhaps, perhaps it was just that he did not approve of Drake? Well, who was he to be making such decisions! Did he mean to be the one to choose a husband for her?

Chapter Eight

Dawn's question, *Did he mean to choose a husband* for her, was precisely what Steele asked himself as he made the trip to Windy Towers for the second time that day. He sat back in his handsome closed carriage and contemplated the dim wall light without really seeing it. Was it that he felt responsible for her welfare because she had been a virgin until he had seduced her? Was that the problem? After all, he had known that she was a virgin, that she was alone, that she was vulnerable, and still he had taken her. He had never stooped so low before. Damn!

Still, he was not all to blame. She had flashed her eyes, her hips, her smile, at him. She had allowed him to take her. That's right. She was a woman . . . she knew what she was doing, and he was only human. Still, even after he had made excuses for himself, it irked him that he had allowed himself to take advantage of her on his clipper. Right, then, so the answer was to look out for her now. That was why he was keeping a watchful eye in her direction.

WILD DAWN FEVER

You kissed her this afternoon, said a voice somewhere in his head. If you feel so guilty about what you did, why repeat the action? A good question, and it required an answer. So he mulled over the problem. Yes, he answered finally, but that was all I did. I only kissed her. There is nothing in that. His carriage had come to a stop, and his postilion was opening the door, lowering the steps for him to alight. There was no time to contemplate any further irritating questions.

Lady Dewey's personality turned out to be something of a trial for poor Steele. She was a silly woman full of pomp and nonsensical conversation. She laughed at nothing in particular, which in itself was only half the problem, the other half being the fact that she expected anyone within hearing to laugh with her. When they did not, she would wait, giggling all the while, and teasing her audience until they joined in her mirth.

Her son was stout, just forty, bald, and quiet. Lady Amherst gossiped with Lady Dewey, who pushed her son at Dawn and insisted they sit together so that Dewey could tell Dawn all about his butterfly collection.

Drake was in rare form; he teased Dewey unmercifully, and Dawn had to rap him unobtrusively more than once. However, she could not help but be thankful for his presence as Dewey was awfully difficult to converse with for any length of time.

Steele watched, sipped his brandy, and decided that in no way would he allow Drake to have Dawn. His brow went up when Dawn moved to a sideboard to pour herself some light white wine and Drake followed her, whispering in her ear, "Ah, beauty, what are we doing here with these quizzes?"

"Drake, you are dreadful. These people are friends of the dowager's. Now, do be polite." Dawn smiled at him affectionately.

"For you I shall make the supreme effort, but look at his face and tell me . . . it is a supreme effort!"

Dawn tweaked his nose and pursed a kiss at him. "You are a rogue."

"Ah, sweet, alone, we must be alone," he answered her, taking up her hand and putting it in sure purpose to his lips.

Steele saw their play and felt a certain vibration closely associated with jealousy tingle his nerves. How dare Drake Stafford touch her like that? Damn, but she didn't seem to mind. Hell and fire. He stepped forward, leaving the dowager and the Lady Dewey to each other, and moved toward Dawn.

"Dawn. Do you know what you do to me?" Drake asked in a husky tone.

She smiled at him and said softly, "You do that so well; another girl might be convinced."

"Do you doubt me?" He was surprised, and his brow went up with the resonance of his voice. "Don't you know how beautiful you are?"

"The marvel is that she does not," put in Steele, now looming above them. He silently toasted Dawn with his glass of brandy. "Such is her magic."

Drake frowned. Dawn grimaced and laughed. "Oh, stop, both of you, for you will end in turning my head." She looked over at Dewey and sighed. "Come, I know what we will do. We will play ducks and drakes. You will like that, won't you, Dewey?"

WILD DAWN FEVER

For the first time that evening he beamed, and said, with something close to a sparkle, "Yes . . . why, yes indeed!"

Steele raised his blue eyes heavenward. Drake suppressed a sigh, and Dawn went in search of the board.

It wasn't long before Lady Dewey was drawn into the game, and Steele extricated himself easily by saying he meant to sit with Lady Amherst for a time. The dowager eyed him. "Trying, isn't it?"

"What, my love?" he answered, and took up her hand to his lips.

"Rogue! Think I don't realize you wish us all at the devil?"

He was surprised. "Not you, love."

"Ah, perhaps not, but the others are sorely in your way." She was at that moment searching her beaded bag and coming up with "Drat!"

"What is it?"

"I've left my stupid powder upstairs. Well, the walk will do me some good."

"Shall I fetch it for you?" he returned, an idea suddenly coming to mind.

"No, I want some exercise, otherwise I could have rung and had one of the servants go." Then as an afterthought, "Deuced quantity of 'em round the place, you know. You may accompany me if you like."

"Good, for I did want private speech with you, and this is the perfect opportunity," he answered, rising and giving her his hand as she got up from the sofa they had been occupying.

They excused themselves and moved to the winding staircase. The dowager eyed him thoughtfully, "Want to talk to me, eh? What about?" She was always direct.

He patted the hand she had slipped through his bent arm and looked at her fully. "About Dawn."

"I had no doubt of that, whippersnapper!" she returned acidly. "So allow me to rephrase the question. Why?"

"I don't trust her relatives," he answered, just as directly.

"Why?" she repeated, her face a mask.

"I think Drake Stafford is worthless, and after Windy Towers. I think Charles is trapped by his engagement, but that he is ruthless enough to forget the proprieties and find a way to attain Windy Towers one way or another, and I think Stacy would help either one."

"A very nice summation," was all the dowager would answer.

"Well, what do you propose to do about it?"

She eyed him. "You don't give Dawn enough credit."

"She is a green girl. She is innocent and could be easily hurt," he returned.

"No, not by the people you mentioned." They had reached the top of the stairs and were crossing to the dowager's suite of rooms. She smiled at him, for he was looking at some of the paintings that lined the papered wall of the ornate hallway. "Lovely, aren't they?"

"Yes, very. You know, it is an odd thing, considering the size of this establishment, but there is a certain warmth to the decor."

She smiled at him, and, remembering Augusta Stafford fondly, she said softly, "That was Gussie, you know. She added the Georgian touch of our day. It was just what the place needed." She sighed. "Dawn made me take Augusta's suite, you know. The dear child felt I would be more comfortable in it than any other."

"Dawn is sensitive to such things," he answered, and

WILD DAWN FEVER

leaned up against the doorjamb, his arms folded across his middle. "What, then, did she take for herself?" It seemed an idle enough question.

The dowager started into the room but stayed to throw over her shoulder, "She took the pink suite. She said it was where she always stayed when she was here with Gussie."

"And no doubt near enough to you?" he pursued.

"No, no. All the way down the hall. It takes up an entire corner there. Now, if you will just wait for me, scamp, I will swallow my powder, and we may return to everyone before they think you are being seduced by an old woman!"

"Let them think it!" He laughed after her and was pleased enough to see the older woman smile happily.

He then returned his attention to the dimly lighted hall, down to its end where Dawn's rooms were situated. Well, well, an amusing thought, but too dangerous . . . wasn't it?

A certain amount of danger added spice to one's life. When that same danger was also something that could result in a great deal of pleasure, then it was something worth the effort, wasn't it? Such thoughts moved Steele to be the last to leave. He waited until the Deweys had made their farewells, and then it was just a matter of outmaneuvering Drake. Steele could see that Drake had no intentions of departing until he meant to leave, and he smiled to himself. Right, one had to appear to leave. He stood up and went first to the dowager.

"I don't wish to overstay my welcome, Sarah, so for-

give me, I find I must leave you with Drake and trust you to handle the situation." It was bait.

She was too wise to fall for his tricks and rapped his hand.

"Scamp. Drake may stay if it amuses Dawn to have him do so. If it doesn't, she will send him on his way." And then in a whisper, "I repeat, you do not give her enough credit."

"Hmmm. Perhaps you are right." He moved then to Dawn and drew her away from Drake. "I can see that you go on very well without me, so I am taking myself off . . ." he started to say.

Dawn, unlike the dowager, did jump for the bait. "No, no . . . I mean, must you . . . ?"

Her reaction warmed his blood and strengthened his resolve. "I am afraid I must, but perhaps we may meet again soon . . . ?"

She pounced on it like a bubbling child. "How soon?"

He laughed and tweaked her nose affectionately. "We shall see."

She inclined her head and moved with him. "I shall walk with you to the front door."

"You needn't," he said softly, but took up her hand and slid it through his bent arm.

She looked up at his face and said on a low note, "No? But then, I wish to."

"Ah, and you are a lady who does what she wishes?"

"When allowed the opportunity," she answered, matching him, look for look.

"Even if it breaks with the proprieties?" He was teasing her for an answer, and when he felt her stiffen, he realized what she thought he was saying.

"You refer to my lapse of conduct on the high seas?" Her chin was up. "We broke the rules, and yes, it was what I wanted at the time." Then on her heel and before they reached the front door she turned from him.

"And now?" he called after her.

"Good night, my lord" was all the answer she would give him.

Even so, he smiled to himself and walked the distance to the front doors. He had called ahead for his carriage to give his driver time to hitch up the horses and was therefore not kept waiting. However, he grinned at his man and said lightly, "You may take me down the drive, but stop at its end."

"Stop, m'lord?"

"That's right, Willy, stop at the front gates." He was in high spirits, and his driver could see this, but whatever was his lordship up to now? He had been with Lord Norington a great many years, and often was the time his lordship would do the unexpected. Well, it would appear this was to be one of those times.

Chapter Nine

*I*t was easy enough to make the distance to the side of the large wing that housed Dawn's suite of rooms. Steele scanned the building and was pleased to find that he would be able to scale the heights to her terraced window by using the lead piping and the tangle of ivy vines that rippled up the corner of the structure. He waited and smiled to see Drake Stafford leave. Well, well, it would appear that the dowager might be right, for someone had sent him on his way.

He had told his man to drive his carriage toward an inn at a nearby village and to enjoy himself for an hour and then to return to the front gate to pick him up. His man had not dared to question him regarding this peculiar action but accepted it all calmly enough and did what he was told. The fact that his lordship had slipped him a few coins with which to enjoy himself did much to mollify the older man.

Now Steele had but to wait and watch for . . . ah, there

WILD DAWN FEVER

it was, candlelight! Dawn had entered her room with her glass-covered candle and set it down on her nightstand while she lighted additional candles. Molly came to her and helped her unbutton the back of her gown. She had already set a roaring fire in the grate and warm washwater in its stand.

"That's it, Molly . . . go on to your bed."

"Ah, but, miss, won't ye be needing me to brush yer hair and put away yer gown?" Molly objected.

"No, dear. It is late, and you can attend to my clothes in the morning, and I think I can brush my own hair." Dawn smiled and watched the girl go before she slipped out of her gown, allowing it to drop to her feet. Her underclothes followed before she moved to take up her pink silk wrapper. She never even heard her balcony door open and close, never noticed that one of the candles she had lighted blew out. She was angry with Steele, her mind full with him, when suddenly a man's arm was going around her waist.

She opened her mouth to scream, but Steele had very wisely used his free hand to cover her mouth, and his voice was soft in her ears. "It's only me, sweetheart."

She turned in his arms and wanted to stomp her feet at him. "How dare you?" she demanded on a seething, blistering note of rage.

"Do you wish me to go?"

"Yes!" But as she watched him turn and start to leave, she reached for him and detained him. "Steele . . . Steele . . ."

"What?" He was smiling at her, in total command of the moment.

“What? What do you mean, What? What are you doing?” she nearly screeched.

With his hand motioning for quiet he gave her a dramatic face of disapproval, saying, “Hush, sweet, you don’t want the house around us, now, do you?” And then even more glibly, “Think how it will look.”

“You horried thing! Why are you here?” She was almost beside herself now. Thrilled with his presence, overwhelmed by the excitement of his daring, enraged by the same, and yet unable to send him away, she could no longer think.

“Why?” he answered now softly, and drew her to him. “Because we needed to be alone . . . together.” And so saying, his mouth found hers at last. All night he had been looking at her lips, her body, finding her eyes full with the promise of passion. All night he had been wanting to touch her, stroke her, feel her suppleness pressed against his body. Her lips parted beneath the tenderness of his own, and his tongue teased hers into responding. Damn, but she tasted so good! He drew away only long enough to tell her huskily, “Ah, love, your tongue is so hot, so delicious.” He was nibbling at her lips, at her ears; he was undoing her wrapper, fevering as it fell around her feet, and then he was taking her mouth again, and this time he was too hungry to temper his ardor.

His hand moved deftly, taking her breast, teasing the nipple already pert, already waiting, anticipating his lips, which made their slow progress down her neck and over the fullness of her breast. He suckled there, his tongue tracing the rosebud peak before he was once again kissing her mouth. His hands moved to her rump and pulled her

WILD DAWN FEVER

into him almost roughly, and Dawn felt a sure abandon grip her soul.

Her hand moved to his chest and undid his waistcoat. He helped her, and both coat and vest were shed. He undid his cravat and then the buttons of his white linen shirt as her hands roamed over his body, down to his hips and then further. Dawn's hand lingered over the hardness of his manhood, felt its shape, breathed hard as it pulsed beneath her touch, and then she was undoing his breeches, wanting to rip them off.

He stood bared to the waist and watched her as she tore at his breeches. She was a beauty, naked, ripe, hungry, and his. He felt a passion never before experienced with another woman, and he reached out and took hold of her head, bringing her to him as he kissed her long, sweetly, urgently. He took a moment to say huskily, "Babe, ah, babe; give me your tongue. . . ."

And she did. He took it to his own and played, taught, teased her to understand, as he heightened her ardor, moved her into frenzy.

Somehow he had managed to back her toward the bed; somehow he had eased her onto its satin softness, pulled her on top of him. He lay, his eyes closed, as she kissed his face, his nose, his eyes, his lips, down his neck to his lean, muscular chest. There she allowed her tongue to play with his nipples before she continued the journey to his belly. His hands had taken her rump, and expertly they manipulated, exciting her to further action. She took hold of his staff, traveled its length with her lips, licked at its tip, felt it pulsate to her touch.

She heard his encouragement—he told her how good she made him feel, and then she was timidly taking his rod

into her mouth, moving it in a fashion she knew he found pleasing. He groaned as she worked him well and then he felt himself climaxing.

"Ah, baby . . . oh, sweetheart . . . now . . ."

She took it out of her mouth and watched as he gave his seed to the linens, and she felt much pleased with herself. He lay there for a time before he reached for her and pulled her into his arms and beneath the covers.

"Do you know how good you make me feel? Do you know how beautiful you are?"

She shook her head. "Uh-uh . . . you tell me . . ." She was smiling at him. Was she really here with Steele? Had she actually been so wanton with him? What was he thinking? Did he love her a little? Hadn't he come back to have her? He could have anyone, but he had come back to have her. Didn't that mean something?

"You are special to me," he said softly, and kissed her nose.

"How special?" She peeped up at him.

"Very special. There, now is that enough?"

"No," she answered simply.

"No?" And then with an eyebrow up, "Oh, you want more."

"I want you to love me," she answered, "as I love you."

"All women always ask that, and I am afraid, little mermaid of mine, *that* is something I can't give."

"Can't you . . . ?" She was nibbling at his ear, moving on top of him to nibble at his lips.

He rolled her over onto her back. "No, but this is something that might make up for it." His mouth was on hers at first tenderly but—and it amazed him to what

WILD DAWN FEVER

extent she could arouse him—then with deep passion. His hands held and played with her breasts, then they moved to her waist, to her hips, as he poised himself to enter her.

She brought up her legs, spreading them wide, thrusting to meet his dive. She was tight, hot, and ready. He groaned with exquisite delight as he took her, rotated her hips in rhythm to his movement. She churned for him, met his every beat and found that it was her own. He brought her to climax, then another, as he whispered enchantment in her ears. Then he eased her over, moved to pull her on top of him, kept her seated on him, as he plunged himself deeper and held to her hips. She crooned his name as he took her to new heights, and then he was pulling her to his chest, holding her tight, as he found his final satisfaction.

“Oh, sweetheart . . . you are so good for me . . .” he whispered.

She couldn’t stop the words from coming. “And yet you would see me wed to another?”

He didn’t answer her at first, and that was because his reaction to this was anger—sharp, illogical anger. He calmed himself and said, “I would see you happy.”

“I love you, my Captain Lord Norington, but I am not sure you make me happy.”

He raised himself up to look at her in his arms and held her still. “Oh? Never say so. You seemed very . . . er . . . happy only a moment ago.”

“That,” she returned, blushing, “is different.”

“Yes. So it is.” He was pulling away, getting up.

She sat up on her elbow. “You are leaving?”

“I must. My poor man is waiting for me down the road, and I have kept him up long enough.”

"And . . . will I see you again . . . ?" she asked shyly, afraid of his answer.

He had pulled on his breeches, but he leaned over the bed and dropped a kiss onto her lips. "Hmmm" was all he answered.

"Soon?" she pursued.

"Soon," he answered, and smiled. He was quickly donning his clothing. She got up and slipped into her wrapper, went round to him, and helped him button his shirt, helped him on with his coat, walked with him to the window. "Be careful going down," she said softly.

He pulled her to him and kissed her long, and then as an afterthought he said, "I won't see you married to Drake, though."

"Oh?" she returned defiantly. "Even if it made me happy?"

"Would it?" he returned sharply.

"Oh . . . I don't know. How could I? You are the only man . . . I have ever loved, so I guess only time will tell how I may feel about Drake, or any other man, for that matter."

"I am serious," he said, taking her shoulders. "Drake only wants your inheritance."

"And you? What do you want?" she riposted quietly.

"Your beautiful body," he answered on a chuckle.

"Get out of here." But she was smiling, accepting the tease for what it was. She bent to receive the light kiss he placed on her lips and then held to him. "Oh, but I wish you could stay. . . ."

"Go on, little one," he answered. "Off to bed. And this time do it for sleep."

WILD DAWN FEVER

"Wretched man!" she called after him as he descended her wall.

She watched him vanish into the darkness and sighed. What to do? How to win his heart? How to win his name? Would they come together? He was so set against marriage, or was it marriage to her he was set against?

Chapter Ten

Charles stood for a long time and watched the back of the retreating little man and then shuddered. That he, the Earl of Redcliff, should have had to sustain such an interview! How had it happened? How had he not foreseen it? He had been rash. He had thought Dawn had drowned on the *Flying Cloud*, and he had overspent until he was overextended. Now the bank wanted their money!

As if that weren't enough to worry him, there was the little problem he had created when he had misused the revenue from Windy Towers. It had seemed an easy enough thing at the time. He was one of the executors, and as such he had retired all the servants at Windy Towers and installed his own people, all of them answerable to him. They had been paid, as were all bills from the Towers, by Stafford funds. He had then simply submitted a very fine set of receipts for reimbursement.

It had all seemed so easy at the time, and petty, because no one would look into such things, not with Dawn dead

WILD DAWN FEVER

at sea. But she didn't die at sea. She had come to England to claim Windy Towers and her one million sterling.

He took to pacing. What to do? She had insisted on moving into the Towers before he had even managed to reap any great rewards from his scheme. This very morning, in fact, her solicitor would be reading Gussie's will, officially putting the million into her hands. Egad! Well, the Towers was lost to him temporarily, and on top of that he had the bank to deal with.

He was totally overextended. Dangerously in debt. He had done it for Stafford lands. There were improvements he had instituted when he thought that Dawn had drowned. He had purchased equipment for his farmers, he had purchased bonds for himself, made investments that would not show a profit for some years. What to do? The bank insisted on having their principal within six months. They had taken a promise that he would pay the interest only for the time being, and that in itself would be a feat.

Stacy? Not an answer. Theirs would be the joining of two great estates when her father died, but the cash settlement she brought to the marriage would hardly cover his debt. It would answer Drake's petty debts, but not his. Hmmm. Drake. Perhaps he might yet get Drake to leave Dawn be if he thought he might yet get Stacy's hand? Why not? He knew damn well Stacy and Drake were having an affair, so any time he wanted out of his engagement, it would be an easy enough thing. However, he wanted to make sure of Dawn first.

Dawn? She was the crux of the problem, and the answer to the same. If Dawn were to marry him . . . How nicely that would solve this matter. He thought of Dawn and sighed, for she was a bubbly, pretty little thing, whom he

could be quite fond of in time. She did not seem to want him romantically. The alternative was ugly.

Dawn? If she were dead, Windy Towers would be his. The one million sterling would be his. Everything would be solved, and he could still have Stacy and her inheritance. If Dawn were dead, but that would be difficult to contrive. After all, he had not been the only one to discover that he was next in line in his aunt Augusta's will. There were others who knew it, and Dawn's untimely death might prove to be a suspicious occurrence.

Dawn had spent the morning closeted with her late great-aunt's solicitor and banker. She had been dazed to discover the extent of her fortune, but had kept her head long enough to request Mr. Stevens, the banker, to be sure to get an accounting of her expenditures from the Earl of Redcliff and see to it that he was reimbursed. She was surprised when he answered, "Oh, the earl was kind enough to submit a list some days ago, Miss Cesares, and we promptly took care of it on your behalf."

Her eyebrow went up expressively. She glanced at the dowager, who was looking thoughtful but silent, and she smiled to herself before returning her attention to the banker.

"That is excellent, Mr. Stevens, but tell me, should not all such statements receive my signature?"

The solicitor, Mr. Morgan, looked up from his paperwork and studied Miss Cesares. No fool here, he thought and smiled, before silencing Mr. Stevens and saying, "It was I who deprived you of the privilege. I presumed that while you were getting settled in your new home you might not

WILD DAWN FEVER

wish to be bothered with such mundane matters. It is with pleasure that I admit my mistake."

She smiled sweetly at him. "No mistake, sir, and I thank you. However, my father drilled a great many things into my head and one of those things was to manage my own affairs. In the future, I think I would prefer that nothing is paid for on my behalf unless it has my signature."

"Very wise, Miss Cesares," said her solicitor. "And very much like your dear late great-aunt."

"Yes, I remember her fussing over her books and figures," said Dawn quietly, and then she remembered another matter she wanted settled. "Mr. Stevens . . . ?" She called to the banker, who was just putting away his books in his leather satchel.

He looked over his spectacles and said, "Y-es, Miss Cesares?" He was thinking that she was all soft and sweet on the outside but lined with iron on the inside.

She went forward and handed him a slip of paper with an amount written on it. Next to the amount was Lord Norington's name. Dawn said in her business voice, "This is an estimated amount of what I believe I owe the gentleman in question. Would you see to it that it is paid . . . in cash, to him personally at Norington House?"

"Indeed, as you wish, Miss Cesares," answered the banker.

This done, their business concluded, Miss Cesares was pleased to show them out. She returned to the library and moved to sit beside the dowager and said, "So, my dearest Sarah, what think you?"

"I think it odd that Charles never mentioned what an heiress you are!" said the dowager quietly.

"Hmmm. Agreed, but perhaps he did not know?" suggested Dawn.

"He knew."

"Perhaps, but he had nothing to gain by keeping me in the dark," Dawn returned on a frown.

"Did you not admit to me that Charles . . . put a proposal to you?"

"Yes, but—"

"But what? It was wrong of him, and what is more, I don't think he was moved by passion, do you?"

Dawn sighed and said, "It is not Charles that Steele has warned me against; it is Drake."

"Drake? Yes, Steele is bothered by him, though I can't say why. I told him you wouldn't be so stupid as to—why in blazes are you looking ready to eat me?" demanded the dowager, cutting herself off in midsentence.

"You told Steele? Why should you be telling Steele? Was he discussing me with you?" She was seething.

"As a matter of fact, yes. We discussed you, and Drake's attentions to you," said the dowager, pulling herself up to her full diminutive height.

"Oooh! The nerve of the man! How dare he?"

"I think he dares because he cares," said the dowager, and then to herself, Hmmm. Sounds rather nice, and sums it up as well. "Now take a damper and get to those books. I am curious about something."

"Curious about what?" Dawn was diverted enough to be led off the subject by this new question.

"I should like to see if the amount reimbursed to Charles for servants' remuneration is the same as what the servants say they are being paid."

WILD DAWN FEVER

Dawn appeared shocked. "No, Sarah . . . I don't want to do that."

"Don't you, my love?" She shook her head. "I am not being petty. What is done, is done, but it is always good to know."

"No . . . what you are suggesting does not make sense. Charles is wealthy in his own right."

"So he is, and ambitious and ruthless and . . . well, never mind. Your mind is set for the time being." The library door opened, and the butler announced, "The Earl of Redcliff."

The docks were busy in Southampton. Merchants were haggling over their wares, hawkers were chanting theirs, and sailors skipped along their chores in the morning's bright sun. Steele dismounted his dapple gray and grinned to see his clipper gleaming. He spotted Tim at the rigging and put up his hand.

"Ho there, Timmy Clark!"

"Captain!" answered the first mate with enthusiasm, pleased to see him. He went forward to meet him halfway and put out his hand, which Steele took in hearty greeting.

They exchanged quips for a time, brought each other up on all pertinent data, and then with something of a blush, Timmy Clark looked at his shoes and asked lightly, "Well, then . . . don't suppose you heard anything about that little lady?"

Steele suppressed a grin and said, "What lady would that be?"

Timmy glanced at him sharply and then smiled, for he knew his captain well. "Aw, now, Cap'n."

"Yes, as a matter of fact, Miss Cesares is quite well,

and more than once she has asked me to carry her greetings to you."

Timmy smiled. "Doing fine, then?"

"Ay, she is doing fine."

"Ye say more 'n once? Been seeing her, then 'ave ye, Cap'n?"

Steele put up a warning finger. "That is enough about Miss Cesares. Come along; I want to discuss something with you about—"

"Steele!" It was a woman's voice from the pier.

Steele knew the voice at once, and an open grin found its way across his face as he made the distance down the planking to the dock. He went up to the carriage to find the woman already opening the carriage door and awaiting his assistance.

"Fanny!" he called merrily as he took her waist and swung her to the ground. His first impression of her was that her fair looks had improved over the years, and this he noted was in part due to her clothing. She was dressed in the latest kick, and her clothes came from a first-rate designer.

She went into his embrace, holding her wide-brimmed hat in place as she did so, and then took a step back to have an open look at him, at which she sighed. "How did I ever let you get away?"

"You blasted me out of your sphere, love. You said you needed both money . . . and er . . . marriage!"

"Which I got, you miserable wretch, though I should be thanking you." She did a little turn about for him to better view herself.

"So I see."

"I am the Widow Bently," she announced with a gig-

gle. "Do I not play the part well?" Her silks of gray may have been for mourning, but somehow there was little of that about her person.

"Aha!" he ejaculated merrily. "A feat well accomplished . . . and in what . . . two years?"

"Three, my pet," she answered, and fingered his lips. "Three long, tedious years, but he was too old to make too many demands on me."

"Which left you free to amuse yourself?" His brow was up teasingly.

"Yes, but do you know that I grew quite fond of Bently. He was so very good to me, you see, and so for three years I was quite faithful . . . in my fashion."

He laughed out loud and held her to him. "That's my girl."

"No, I am not. You never made me so, but I wouldn't mind it at all, darling," she answered coyly.

While Steele made himself comfortable with a dear acquaintance, Dawn attempted to divert Lady Amherst's fire from Charles. He had come to take her to town, and for some reason Sarah had invited herself along on the expedition. That seemed odd to Dawn, but what came down even odder was Charles's snippy attitude toward the dowager during their carriage ride.

In order to calm the mood, Dawn kept up a stream of nonsensical conversation about almost anything she viewed in passing; and when she saw in the distance the harbor and the big ships an idea came to mind.

"Sarah, Charles . . . let us do go down to the *Lightning*, please. There is someone there I should like to say

hello to." She was thinking of Timmy Clark. It never occurred to her that Steele might be on board the clipper.

"Now, who could you wish to visit on board the *Lightning*?" asked Charles in some surprise. "Lord Norington is no doubt still asleep in his bed."

"I have a friend . . . the first mate." She turned to the dowager. "You remember, Sarah; I told you about Timmy."

"Yes, dear. Do let us stop there. It would be good for you to see him."

It didn't take long for them to find the pier where the *Lightning* was docked for repairs, and as Dawn looked out of her carriage window with growing excitement she was surprised to see Steele, very surprised.

Steele had just jovially agreed to accompany the Widow Bently to a nearby coffeehouse. She thanked him by going into his casual embrace and planting a kiss upon his lips. "There, my darling," she said softly. "And there is more to come if you can manage to give me your time."

"What I can give you is an excellent cup of coffee and the finest chocolate tarts in all the New Forest," he answered, and helped her into her carriage, quickly climbing in afterward. They laughed and settled in to talk of old friends and old times.

Dawn's heart took on a sure chaotic beating. The woman was lovely, blond, sophisticated, and seemed to be quite at ease in kissing Steele in public. Steele had responded to the woman. Steele had gone off with the woman . . . God only knew where. Steele . . . who had kissed her last night, held her, and made sweet passionate love to her. Off he went with another woman as though he could do the same with her just as easily. Her stomach churned, and she welled with anger, hurt, jealousy, but she controlled

herself and smiled at Sarah and Charles, who had witnessed the whole.

"Ah . . . it seems we have missed his lordship, but never mind, it wasn't he I wished to see." So saying, she alighted and moved in the direction of the planking.

Sarah watched her for a time in deep thought. The girl hid her pain quite well but not thoroughly enough from the dowager. So it would appear that Dawn had indeed lost her poor heart to the lord of Norington. Well, well, what to do about that?

Charles said lightly, "I shall join Dawn."

"No, Charles, not yet," said Sarah. "Allow the girl her time. We will follow her in a few moments. In the meantime, you may tell me who that ravishing creature with Norington might be?"

"An old flame of his, if I remember correctly," said Charles. "Why?"

"Gossip, you know. We old things thrive on it. Have nothing else, you see."

This managed to make him laugh amicably and proceed to tell her all he knew about the Widow Bently. "She is the illegitimate daughter of the Duke of Arlington, but he never recognized her publicly . . . nor has he ever provided for her. She has lived most of her adult life by her charm, her wits, and—"

"Yes, I quite understand. Was he enamored of her?"

"Who, Norington?" He shrugged. "Who can tell. They were something of an item a few years ago, before Bently gave her his name."

"I see," said the dowager thoughtfully, and then to change the subject quickly, continued, "Come along, then, Charles; we should join that naughty puss. I half expected

her to show herself topside by now, but she has quite forgotten us!”

Indeed Dawn had chosen to forget everything but the fact that she was once again with the crew of the *Lightning*. She was jesting with Cook when Timmy heard her voice and stuck his head into the galley. “Zounds, woman! Don’t you look fine,” he exclaimed.

She dived at him and flung her arms round his neck and nearly cried when she said his name. A flood of memories poured into her brain, and she held to him for a time before she let him go and stood back to look at him. “Ah, Tim, you do, too. Faith, it is so good to see you.”

They talked for a bit, until Sarah and Charles called for her, and then the spell was interrupted. There was nothing for it but to make the introductions and to take her leave, but not before she had promised to return for a longer visit. She dropped a kiss upon Timmy’s cheek and was gone. It was so strange. Even now, even after seeing Steele with another woman, she felt a sense of belonging to anything connected with his interests. How could that be? Why was that? This was going to have to stop. He was not for her. He was a free agent and would never tie himself to her, to just one woman.

Chapter Eleven

*T*he Wailing Tavern was a cozy establishment that catered to the aristocracy. Its decor was Georgian in design, its colors muted yellows and rich browns. Steele leaned back against his boothed bench and gazed at the Widow Bently through shaded blue eyes. She was a pretty woman, full-figured and with a ready wit that was both entertaining and provocative, but something, he could not say what, had him already restless and ready to quit her company.

“Won’t you see me home, darling?” Fanny Bently lashed her hazel eyes coyly. “After all, with all that has been happening recently in the New Forest, I would feel so much safer if you were to accompany me to Bently House.”

He frowned at that. “What do you mean? What has been happening in the New Forest?”

She leaned over the table and touched his fingers, now playing with the rim of his pewter of ale. “Did you not hear?”

"Fanny!" he chided. "If I had, I would not be asking."

"Yes, well as it happens, it is a most intriguing thing, and no one seems to understand it really."

He lost patience. "Fanny, do you mean to tease or to give it to me full and straight?"

She groaned on a flirtatious note. "Ah, love, I would like nothing better than to give it to you . . . full . . . straight . . . any way you like."

He laughed and wagged a finger. "You are courtesan no longer, sweetings, but lady of the manor; you must learn to act the part."

Her lips formed an attractive pout. "How dreadfully boring."

"Well, then, what has been happening in the New Forest?" he pursued the subject.

"Last night a pack of thieves, perhaps six of them, entered Abbet Castle openly, with guns pointed, and when Sir James attempted to stand up to them, they shot him!"

"Certes, woman, are you sure? Is Jimmy boy all right?" He knew Sir James of Abbet very well.

"Yes, I am sure. Servants carry news faster than any vehicle ever known to man, and the odd thing is they didn't even take more than a handful of jewels."

"What? Why?" He was frowning darkly.

"I don't know. All I know is that they stormed the house, broke right through the front door, seized the servants, and put them under the gun; then up they went to Sir James's chambers and ordered him to produce his wife's jewels. When he put up a fuss, they shot him, but he only received a flesh wound. He and his lady were tied and gagged with the servants, and off the thieves went."

WILD DAWN FEVER

"Come on, then, my girl; off we go." He got to his feet and held his hand out for hers.

"What? Where?" She was surprised, thinking instead the story might keep him with her a bit longer.

"You for your home, and me for Abbet Castle." He drew on a thought. "Has this been the only raid in the area since my return from China? . . . For I'd swear there were none since I was a babe."

"As a matter of fact, no . . . just after your return Hempstead Grange was broken into, but the family was in Europe, and none of the servants were hurt." She eyed him speculatively. "You seem rather disturbed over this, darling—more than you should be. James is not really hurt, you know, and—"

"And nothing!" He cut her short. "I am going to find out what sort of an investigation is underway, for damn if I will stand by and do nothing while these brutes attack the homes of my friends!" He was thinking, Dawn, Dawn alone at Windy Towers with the dowager, and he felt a certain frenzy to be off and doing.

Drake brushed the fringe of fair locks from his forehead and smiled as he sat back against the cushions of the yellow sofa and watched Dawn unwrap the gift he had just placed into her hands. This done, she squealed delightfully to find the box contained a goodly selection of chocolates, every piece inscribed with her name.

"Drake! Chocolates are my weakness." She turned to him and went to kiss his cheek; he moved deftly, and she found instead his lips pressed against her own. She felt herself blush, and her lashes brushed her cheek.

He did not take advantage of the moment. Too much

was at stake to risk frightening her off just now. He said gallantly instead, "Would that I was your weakness, pretty girl." And then, "Go on, try one. I had them specifically made to order. An old family recipe, and the mold with your name is of my own design."

She took one up and moaned pleurably over the taste, though there was something about the chocolate that was different from any she had ever had before. "Oh, Drake, thank you. It is delicious . . . won't you have one?"

"Thank you, no, my beauty. They were made and meant only for you. Put them by your bed and be selfish about them."

"Yes, I think I shall. . . ." She looked up as Charles reentered the library. He had been down to the stables to inspect one of their late aunt Augusta's carriages as Dawn had mentioned she meant to drive herself. "Hallo, Charles. Look at these marvelous chocolates Drake has brought me."

Charles inspected the chocolates without enthusiasm and said offhandedly, "Clever." Then, swiftly changing the subject, he said to Dawn, "I don't know if I can approve of the open carriage with the yellow wheels."

"Why, does it need work? Benny said he thought it was in good order and in the short space of time I have been here, I have found Benny an excellent groom."

"Yes, well . . ." started Charles, but they were once again interrupted by the dowager, who came into the room in some excitement.

"Hallo, children," she said, pulling off her gloves and setting them on the table. "I have the most dreadful news!" The dowager had been out visiting friends. She did not bother to wait for the inevitable questions but

WILD DAWN FEVER

proceeded portentously, "Abbet Castle was attacked last evening by thieves, and Sir James was shot in his own bedroom!"

"What is this?" Charles was surprised. Drake said nothing but studied the dowager a moment before looking long at his cousin.

The dowager went on to say that Sir James was not seriously hurt, but it was all very upsetting just the same and that she had advised the stable staff to have their firearms in readiness should they need defending at Windy Towers.

"How bright you are," applauded Dawn with a laugh. "Up to every rig, Sarah. Who would dare attack us at Windy Towers with you outsmarting them in advance?"

Charles grimaced. "Dawn," he said reproachfully. "I don't find this amusing, and neither should you."

"Oh, Charles, don't be so stuffy," said Dawn with a sigh. "Sarah is distressed, and I was only trying to lighten her mood."

Sarah bent and tapped Dawn's cheek fondly. "La, child, but the wonder is that you have."

"There, you see," said Dawn, and she had a sudden urge to start giggling. She couldn't say why, but she wanted to laugh. With an effort she restrained herself from doing so.

"No, I don't see," Charles answered. "Perhaps I should pack the two of you off and take you to Stafford House!"

"My dear young man," said the dowager regally, "no one packs me off, and don't bluster at me, for there isn't the slightest need to think you must suffocate us with your protection. We shall do very nicely here."

All this while Drake had been watching Dawn with a

slow-growing smile. He said at this interjection, "Indeed, Charles, if these thieves attacked and shot Sir James only last evening, the chances are they would lay low for a time, don't you think?"

"One never knows with desperate men just what they will do," snapped Charles. "But far be it from me to force my protection on you, Dawn, Lady Amherst." Clear! he indicated that he felt insulted.

Dawn giggled, and it brought both the dowager's and Charles's attention on her. She put her hand over her mouth and said, "Oh, please do forgive me . . . I am feeling a bit . . . giddy."

The dowager frowned and wondered if either of the boys had given Dawn too much wine during her absence. She said to Charles with a nod at Drake, "Dawn and I shall do very nicely here at Windy Towers, as well as anywhere else on earth, but the hour is growing late, and I am going to send both you lads off. I am a bit fatigued, and it appears to me that Dawn could use some sleep as well." She waited for both Charles and Drake to each drop a perfunctory kiss upon her hand before she moved to stretch her fingers before the fire. From that vantage point she watched as Drake lingered with Dawn at the library door.

"Good night, pretty thing." Drake tweaked her nose, well pleased with the effect of the chocolates. "Think of me whenever you take a bite of your favorite sweet." There was a gleam in his eye.

She blushed, thanked him again, and turned to find Sarah eyeing the box of chocolates disdainfully. "Oh, dearest Sarah, would you like to try one? They are delicious."

WILD DAWN FEVER

"They may be, but they will add inches to your lovely hips, so put them away. I myself do not indulge." Then after a thought, "Who was it who brought them? Drake?"

"Hmmm," said Dawn. "Sweet of him, wasn't it?" At which she pealed off into uncontrollable mirth.

The dowager smiled, but there was something disturbing about Dawn's laughter. "Go on, then, dear," she told her when her laughter had subsided. "Go on to bed. I'll be up in a little while."

Dawn glanced at the mantelshelf clock and was surprised to find it scarcely nine-thirty; however, she was feeling drowsy. She dropped a kiss on the dowager's cheek, took up her chocolates, and meandered toward the door. She thought of Steele, and suddenly all laughter died inside of her, for the last time she had seen him was when his attention had been devoted to another woman, and that had been only this morning.

Chapter Twelve

*D*rake watched Charles mount his horse and said softly, "What is all this business, do you think? I mean, we have never had thieves breaking into homes whose families were in residence. It is all very odd."

"Isn't it, though," said Charles by way of answer, and then he eyed Drake. "What is in the wind, Drake? Do you mean to win Dawn's heart with chocolates and pretty words?" He laughed derisively. "I don't think she will have you."

"Don't you?" He shrugged. "It doesn't appear to me that she is interested in having you, either."

"I am engaged to Stacy, you know. That does stand in our way," returned Charles caustically.

"I know it, Dawn knows it, but I wonder, Charles, if you know it."

"You are a fool, Drake. You always have been," snapped Charles.

"Am I? Perhaps . . . but I didn't spend away a fortune,

now, did I?" He mounted his horse and dared to sneer, "I have it on good authority, though, that you did. I know, Charles, that you are in a great deal of debt. Now, how can that be? You inherited a goodly sum from the old earl. What happened to it all?"

"It went to the estate . . . into solid investments. It is all there," said Charles, "and in time . . ."

"But you don't have time, do you, Charles?" He urged his horse forward. "On the other hand, *I* do!"

"To do what, braggart?" demanded Charles on a high-pitched note. "She won't have you!"

"Won't she?" Drake shrugged. "There are ways of winning a woman that you, staid Charles, have never dreamed of, and I won't make the mistake of attempting to conquer her heart." He shook his head dramatically, evidently enjoying his cousin's discomfiture. "No, indeed. A heart is an unsteady, unreliable thing. It is not what I am after."

"Never thought you were, but how, then, do you propose to convince Dawn to go to the altar with you?" he sneered. "You were never able to get Stacy there."

This was a hit below the belt, and it irritated Drake into anger. He controlled himself and what he might have said. He took a long pause and said instead, "Stacy is not an innocent and therefore not as easily wielded as Dawn Cesares. *You* should know that." He had the satisfaction of seeing Charles aggravated and laughed over it.

"Fool!" Charles breathed, and spurred his horse forward into the night.

Drake smiled to himself as he watched his cousin's receding form. Horse and rider vanished into the darkness, and Drake spoke softly to himself, "Good night, Charles."

I rather think this time I just may be putting one over on you.' In one week, perhaps two, Dawn would find herself craving chocolate, but only the kind Drake could supply. Indeed, he expected that she would be so fond of the sweets she would do anything . . . *anything* to get hold of them!

It was a clear bright sky and nearly a full moon, enough to light his way as Steele moved his horse cautiously across the fields of Windy Towers and jumped him into a small grassy paddock not far from the stables. He dismounted quickly, took off the saddle, and laid it on the railing of the fence. He detached the leather halter he had brought along, removed the bridle from his horse, and slipped on his halter.

"There, my man, off you go. Graze until I get back." He smiled to himself and nimbly took the fence, quietly making his way toward the wing that held Dawn's room.

It had been an exhausting day. He had visited with Sir James and then off he had gone to the magistrate's to learn what was being done. He found the entire incident upsetting, though why it was he could not say—it was just a gut feeling he had. Dawn. She had come to his mind all day. He couldn't get the memory of her touch, of her lips, of the passion she had aroused in him—had it only been last night? It seemed a century ago.

He had finished with the magistrate in Southampton and returned to his clipper, where the men had excitedly told him of Dawn's visit. He was at first pleased that she had been there, then he was perturbed at her timing. Had she seen him with Fanny? So what if she had. Yes, but had she seen him with Fanny? The mind is a funny thing,

and though you may present it with logic of the best kind, it still may reject and create a logic all its own. He told himself that it was his business whether or not he chose to cavort on any level with any woman. He had made Dawn no promises; would make her none. Therefore, what did it matter if she had seen him with Fanny? Besides, he hadn't done anything with Fanny, now, had he? No. Yes, but he had the right, didn't he? Of course. And the question returned to haunt him; had she seen him with Fanny?

He would go to her in the night, and he would see for himself, and he would handle it immediately, nip it in the bud. He had quite decided that Dawn must be his. More than that he had not thought about, would not think about, but at the same time he must teach her to understand that she could not expect anything from him. Wonderful reasoning. Even to himself he sounded lame.

He made his way as he had the other night to her terraced balcony and stood a moment listening. He had to be sure she was alone. From the looks of the house everyone seemed to have retired for the evening, but still, he couldn't be certain her maid was not within. Nothing. Not a sound. He looked through the sheer hangings, and his brow went up to see Dawn stretched on a hearth rug by a blazing fire.

She was exquisite. She lay on her side, her flimsy nightdress clinging to her body, her long black hair in disarray down her back, over her shoulder. He felt a certain stirring, and it was more than desire—perhaps it was affection, he told himself—and took the latch in his hand. The door opened quietly, and he stepped into the room.

Dawn had been feeling dreamy and loose-limbed.

Thoughts of Steele had gently intruded. She loved the way his hair fell in layered waves to his neck. She loved the glint of gray that laced his ginger locks. She loved his deep blue eyes and how they would twinkle at her. How firm he was . . . how wide were his shoulders. She sighed to think of how easily he commanded her soul. There was an air of authority about him that everyone he met was aware of almost immediately. How his voice could thrill her, and, oh, faith, how could he have made love to her last night and gone off with that beautiful woman this morning? Never mind, she told herself, and then for no reason she thought of the chocolate—maybe she would eat another.

As she moved to reach for the box on a wall table not far away, something in the darkness caught her attention, and then she saw his form. Her voice came in a whisper as she moved to her knees. "Steele?" There was so much about her surroundings that didn't seem quite real, as though she were moving within the confines of a fantasy.

He was standing there bending to take her face in his hands, moving to kiss her forehead, saying her name in sweet accents, "Hallo, Dawn," and then in sweeter yet, "Hallo, love." He was drawing her up, taking her into his embrace, moving his lips from her neck to her mouth.

It was good, so good, to be in his arms, but something wasn't quite right. He always made her legs feel weak beneath her, but this time the earth swayed as well, the room tilted and hazed. His lips parted her own, and his tongue explored in easy fashion, winning a slow response from her.

She found she had to have air, and she held on to him as

she drew her mouth away. "Steele . . . I . . . I don't think I can stand. . . ."

He frowned and helped her gently back to the hearth rug, looking at her appraisingly as he dropped off his riding coat and came to sit, one knee up, beside her. He took her chin.

"What is it, sweetheart, too much wine at dinner?"

"No . . . I don't think so. . . ." She smiled weakly. "Drake and Charles dined with me tonight. Sarah went to friends, but I am sure I had only one glass." She puzzled over it as he continued to study her face.

He wasn't pleased. What was this? She had the look of someone . . . certes, if he didn't know better, he would have thought she had smoked opium. No, impossible. The wine must have gone to her head. He reached for her and drew her into his embrace and said softly, "Did you miss me today?" Now, why was he asking this? To find out if she had seen him with Fanny. To bring it into the open.

"As much as you missed me, I'm sure," she answered, with the peep of a smile. His expression caused her to giggle, and she reached and held his neck, positioned herself and kissed him, this time parting his lips, this time thrusting her tongue within to tease his own. She felt his response, and it excited her to move her free hand to his firm, muscular thigh. Her kiss was burning him into another as her hand teased his inner thigh, moved into place, and found that his rod was already hard and throbbing. She undid the buttons of his breeches and whispered softly, "Want me, Steele?"

"Ah, baby . . . I am here, aren't I?" His hand moved to cup her breast as his fingers teased the pert nipple.

"Yes, you are here now . . . and when you are not

are you with someone else?" She was kissing a path down his throat as her hand released his staff and caressed in provocative fashion.

He stopped her, set her apart, and looked into her eyes. So, she had seen him with Fanny. Right. Put her in her place. He answered instead, "Not like this. You are the only woman, sweetheart. Any other is a friend . . . only a friend."

"Ah, but why should you say so?"

"Because I wish to. I don't have to answer to you, love, but I do *wish* to."

She moved to kiss him again, but he held her at bay and said seriously, "Do you understand, Dawn?"

"Hmmm" was all she meant to answer, for she was thrilled by what sounded like truth. He had said she was the only woman in his life, and for the moment that was enough. She began unbuttoning his shirt, and he groaned as he ran his hands over her body, as he bent, lowering her to her back on the rug. He took up her breast, and his tongue teased before he suckled there. His hands explored, and then she was pushing him onto his back, mounting him to kiss his mouth, and then, moving over his body, she blazed a trail of kisses down his chest, over his belly, until she had his manhood and put it to her lips. She caressed, teased, kissed, and then suckled there until he groaned and took her arms to pull her on top of him. His mouth fevered her as his hand guided him to her.

He took a moment, leaving his pulsating manhood at her opening, manipulating the lips there, teasing her until she was nearly crying. "Oh, Steele . . . please, give it to me. . . ."

He plunged deep and hard, and his thrust made her

croon in sweet delight. His hands deftly worked her body, playing with her breasts, touching her pleasure points, as his voice whispered enchantment in her ears. "Ah, love, you are so hot, so tight . . . you feel so good. . . ." He manipulated her hips into a dance that frenzied them both as his dives increased in fervor.

She groaned as she reached her peak, and as she told him how wild he made her feel, how great he was, he withdrew from her and said hungrily, "Now, my lady. . . ." He was getting to his knees, holding himself in check, reveling in her beauty, as he pulled her round, placing her first on her belly and then tenderly bringing her up, taking her rump into his hands to meet his deep thrust.

He entered her again, and this time they both groaned in hedonistic ecstasy as his dives, his moves, became near-violent. His hands explored the trim waist, the lovely curve of hips; went further to the dangling breasts and cupped there as he voraciously took her to himself. He wanted to go on inside of her, it felt so good, but he couldn't hold back anymore, and he climaxed within her.

They collapsed together to the hearth rug, and he moved onto his back, putting his arm round her and pulling her up against his side. She moved slightly to touch a soft kiss to his lips. "I have no other to judge by, my love, but I rather think you are a great lover."

He pulled her closer possessively. "Trust in your instinct, then, sweetheart, for I mean to be your *only* lover!"

"Ah . . . is that so?" she teased. "And what gives you the right?"

"I fished you out of the sea, and therefore you are mine. Simple good sense!" he answered her, his eyes still closed, his lips forming a smile.

"Simpleminded," she shot back at him, and giggled.

He looked at her then and kissed her forehead. "I'll tell you what, sweet thing, I thank the gods I was the one to fish you out of the sea."

"I am rather thankful about that myself, Captain," she peeped at him. If only he would say he loved her, but he hadn't yet, even though she had said so more than she thought was wise. She couldn't stop herself from saying so now. "I love you, Steele. You are a wondrous, perfect man."

"If you want perfection, love, you have only to look in the mirror" was his answer.

She wanted to hit him. Instead she settled for it and said instead, "I . . . I wish you didn't have to go yet."

He rolled over onto his side and pressed a tender kiss to her lips. "Sweet desire, I have no intention of going for some hours yet!"

Chapter Thirteen

*I*t was nearly three in the morning before Steele deftly made his way toward his horse. The night was still clear, and the air was cool and crisp, and he drew on it to clear his head, for he was feeling sleepy, and it had not been an easy thing to leave Dawn and the comfort of her bed.

Something rustled at his back and idly he looked round. An eerie sensation went up his spine, and instinct sent him to the tall yew tree. He couldn't imagine what a servant would be doing up and about, unless one of the male servants had taken a jaunt into town? However, he did not wish to be seen, so he kept very still and watched.

It was a rider dressed in a dark cloak and dark wool cap. Steele watched as the man rode up to the side of the house, dismounted, and began slowly looking over the grounds. Steele's brow went up with sudden understanding as the man did a tour of the building, stood at one corner, and surveyed his surroundings. This was no servant!

Steele's mind worked in quick degrees. He remained in

place and watched. He couldn't catch this fellow without stirring the household and raising the question of what he was doing here at such an hour. Just what the man was doing was a puzzle until he saw the darkly clad rider dismount and move to a window.

"Damn!" he breathed out loud, and then thought to himself, Could this be one of the thieves who hit the Abbet Castle last night? Were there more on the grounds? He couldn't allow the blackguard entry into Dawn's home. However, the man did not seem intent on getting into the house. Casually the intruder slinked around, his horse in tow, but he didn't try any of the windows, though he looked at them with interest.

Just what he was about, Steele couldn't readily guess. Was he looking the place over for some future visit? Was this how this group of thieves worked? Well, by God, if so, they had made their last surveillance. No one would get near Dawn Cesares.

The intruder remounted his horse and quietly urged him forward, across the wide expanse of lawn. Steele rushed into action and slinked along the edge of fir trees that lined the walk to the stable paddock. He couldn't get to his horse fast enough; everything seemed to take so long, and then the gray fussed and would not at first let him near. He looked round and saw that the stranger was already at the field gate. Hurriedly he fastened the girth, slid the bit into his horse's mouth, and hooked the halter onto the saddle. He mounted and set his horse to take the paddock fence, over quickly and with less style than speed, but the stranger was already out of sight.

He cursed beneath his breath and didn't bother opening and closing the gate but asked his horse to jump it. The

WILD DAWN FEVER

gray wasn't too excited about the prospect, but he was a natural jumper who had been schooled to do what he was asked. On the other side there was little choice except the trail that was straight ahead, and Steele took it, slowing his horse to listen.

He thought he heard a rider cough, then a horse's hoof hitting rock. Damn, he did hear it. He held up, for he didn't wish to be heard. The trail led eventually to the country road, and with something of a surprise he saw the stranger turn into the woods that flanked Stafford House.

He sat his horse for a long moment and contemplated this new event. What in hell would such a character want at Stafford House at such an hour? Was he casing that establishment as well? Was that how these ruffians worked? This was something indeed. He waited a minute longer and turned into the woods. He couldn't leave it at this, now, could he? He opened the case of his saddle pistol and got it ready, but when he reached the clearing and halted his horse, a light gleamed through the darkness. Candle-light was emanating from a side door that was being held open.

A horse had been tethered to the hitching post at the side of the house, and the stranger was being ushered within. What in thunder was going on? His first discernible conclusion was that a serving maid was somehow involved; his next was, Charles? No, what would Charles want with such a fellow?

Charles moved aside and held his single candle away from the wind. "Come in . . . hurry," he said in a harsh whisper. The hour was late; he was tired, irritated, and ill

at ease in the company of a man whose occupation usually had him riding the highway in the dead of night.

The darkly clad man smiled and exhibited a fine set of very brown, broken teeth. "Ah, now, good evenin' to ye, guv!" He rubbed his ungloved hands together. "It's a sight cold tonight." And then, in a conspiratorial voice, "Ye wouldn't be 'aving a swallow of firewater, now, would ye?"

"Yes, yes, but not here. We'll go into the library."

"Reet ye are, guv. The library." The high toby smiled amicably, but as he followed Charles round the bend in the hall and down the dark corridor, he kept a wary eye. He didn't trust Charles; didn't trust any of the aristocracy. Thus far, Charles had paid him and his men well for their services, but there was never any telling when such a man might turn; after all, wasn't he doing that to his own?

Charles opened the library door, stood to one side, and allowed the high toby to pass before him before he closed the door and put his candle holder down on a sideboard table. He moved to another table and there poured two snifters of brandy, taking one and shoving it almost roughly at the man. "There, Mr. Tibbs. Firewater!" There was almost a sneer of derision, but Mr. Tibbs didn't mind it; he had sampled a fine French brandy from time to time, and this was one of those times. If the flash cove meant to look down his nose, fine, just so long as he got what he came for.

"Fine stuff, this," said Mr. Tibbs, smacking his chapped full lips.

Charles took a long gulp of his own before bringing his question to voice. "Well, then, when do you plan to take care of Windy Towers?"

WILD DAWN FEVER

Mr. Tibbs scratched his stubbled chin and cheek.

"Dunno."

"What do you mean, you don't know?" demanded Charles.

"'Aven't been paid fer the Abbet rig yet, now 'ave oi?"

Charles pulled a small leather bag from out of an inner pocket and dropped it on the table. "There is your payment. One hundred gold guineas as promised."

"Roit." Mr. Tibbs moved, took up the purse, shook it, grinned, and pocketed it. "Oi'll be trusting ye till oi count it loiter!"

"Now, if you will . . ."

"Tomorrow night. We mean to go in, gather up the household so there won't be any loose ends, ye see . . . take whot gold we can find . . . rough up and then kill the little loidy. Ain't that whot ye bargained fer?"

Charles felt himself squirm inwardly. Rough up the little lady. That was Dawn. Sweet, wild Dawn. Rough up and kill Dawn. That was what he was paying to have done. Murder. He had stooped to murder. "Yes," he said. "That's right."

Then on an afterthought Charles stuck in, "I've decided, though, that she needn't be mishandled. I want her killed quickly, cleanly. I don't want her in pain."

"Dont' ye, though." Again Mr. Tibbs played with his stubbled face. "Thot ain't too smart, if 'n ye don't mind me saying so. It has to look loike the boys and me meant to 'ave our way wi' her . . . she resisted and in the ruckus she got herself shot. Ye don't want her shot outright; people would wonder at it?"

Charles frowned. "Yes . . . I suppose you are right."

"Know me business, oi do, but oi tell ye whot. Never killed a loidy before. Never killed no female before, and the boys . . . they weren't too 'appy about it, neither. We'll be 'aving to leave fer the north soon as it's done . . . so when ye come to meet us at the Bell afterwards . . . ye'll be bringing not five hundred gold pretties, but one thousand of 'em . . . hear?"

"One thousand? That is outrageous!" Charles fumed.

"Hear tell ye'll be coming into a hefty sum when the mort is done, so oi don't think it be too much. And, guv, oi'll be toiking half on our way to Windy Towers . . . half when 'tis done."

"I can't get it by tomorrow."

"Then, we'll be putting the ken off till ye can," said Mr. Tibbs, shrugging. "Ye've got the setup ye do. People will jest think 'tis one more robbery. . . . we grazed that old gent, so people will be saying we're bloodthirsty. 'Tis best to move quickly, when no one expects it."

"Yes, yes, tomorrow night, then," Charles hissed. He downed the remainder of his brandy and said viciously, "Now get out! And don't let anyone see you leaving."

"Oi knows me busines, oi does," replied Mr. Tibbs. "Remember yours!"

Chapter Fourteen

“Stacy, get out of here!” It was Drake, and he was in a frosty mood. He watched the tall ethereal blonde move into his study and glide across the well-worn Oriental carpet, and he grimaced.

She had a set look about her face, and when she came up before him, it was to put her arms around his neck and place a lingering kiss upon his lips. “Haven’t you missed me, Drake?”

“No. I don’t think about you anymore,” he answered cruelly.

“Drake?” She was surprised. “What is it? What is wrong?”

He laughed, and it was a hard sound. “In fact, Stacy . . . if I were you, I would look to my intended groom, because he is looking elsewhere these days.”

Her eyebrow went up. “Nonsense. Charles adores me. He always has; he always will.”

“He adores the little inheritance that comes with you,

but now he is looking to an even larger inheritance—only he won't get it, because I mean to do so."

"You are disgusting!" She threw it at him.

"And you shouldn't be here." His voice softened in spite of himself. He didn't want to care for Stacy. She was marrying Charles, wasn't she?

She put her arms round him once more. "Drake, it's you I want, but, it is Charles my father expects me to marry. It was arranged so long ago . . . Drake, I must."

"Then, you shouldn't be here with me now. What if someone observed you coming here and reported it to Charles? I am a bachelor. You could have no viable excuse for being here."

She didn't have to really go to her toes to kiss him, for she was nearly as tall as he, but she did, for he would not budge, would not yield to her urging. She parted her lips; she teased him with her tongue; she pleaded with her mouth and her body as she pressed against him.

"I don't care. Don't you understand? I love you, Drake . . . I want you. Charles is Charles. He will marry me and allow me my pleasures."

She always brought out the snarling animal in him. He felt it now well up within him. He wanted to shout her down. He wanted to abuse her for even thinking of going to Charles's bed, but he couldn't do more than respond to the passion she always aroused in him. "Stacy . . . I wish you would go away and leave me in peace," he hissed at her as his hand came up to find her breast.

"Do you, Drake? Or do you want me to stay for just a while yet?"

He answered her with his lips. Ravenously he kissed her as his hands worked her clothes, exposed her breasts to his

hungry touch. As he lowered her to his sofa, he said her name; as he took her in wild abandon, in mournful passion, he said her name; and later when she had left, out loud he said her name.

"Ah, Stacy . . ." And it was the cry of farewell, for she still had not changed her mind. Even after they had made such wondrous love, she had still said she would marry Charles.

Very well, so be it. He moved to a stack of debts piled high on his desk. He had been lucky, and he had placed a bet that had brought him a tidy sum. Now all he had to do was decide which of the bills needed paying first. In the meantime, he prayed to providence, prayed that Dawn was eating her chocolates and that soon she would be coming to him for more.

Dawn awoke in her bed with a startling headache. She put her hands to her forehead and pressed her head back into the pillow. The next thing she realized was that she was naked under the sheets. She thought of Steele, of their lovemaking, of the sound of his voice in her ears. He still had not said he loved her, but, oh, he had made her feel as though he did. Perhaps she was getting to him. Perhaps thoughts of marriage were starting to tickle his fancy? Oooh, her head.

She looked and saw the time was nearly eight, and it was then that Molly appeared with a tray of hot chocolate and biscuits. Dawn smiled, thanked her, and wondered if there were any signs of Steele's night visit.

Molly chattered as she moved into the next room, where a male servant was heating tubs of water for Dawn's bath. Dawn smiled and sipped the hot brew, looking across the

room at the box of chocolates Drake had brought her. Hmm. Perhaps a chocolate for quick energy? She slipped on a wrapper and moved toward them, but as she opened the box and reached for one, she stopped. She couldn't say why—perhaps the dowager's warning about watching her weight. Oh, one won't hurt! She popped it into her mouth.

It was some time after Dawn had eaten the chocolate that she became aware of the fact that her world was slipping into fantasy. She lay her head back on the rim of the tub and smiled to herself. Everything was so lovely. She pictured a spring day, a blanket laid under a tree, and Steele . . . holding her, telling her he loved her. Wait! What was this?

Dawn had always dealt in realities. Drake had underestimated her if he thought she would blindly drift from one opium dream into another. She sat bolt upright in the tub and forced herself to concentrate. What was wrong? Why was she feeling light-headed?

When she had been young, not quite ten years old, she had taken a bad fall from her pony. She had broken her arm, and her mother had given her a rather strong dose of laudanum for the pain. She had never forgotten how the drug had made her feel. Dizzy, full with a sense of herself, and dreamlike creatures that had seemed so real. Laudanum, derived from opium and alcohol, was something she had henceforth avoided. She hadn't liked the feeling of not being in control, and after the experience she had always preferred the pain to the drug.

Laudanum? She hadn't taken any. All she had had this morning was the hot chocolate and the chocolate from Drake. Was there someone in her household who could

WILD DAWN FEVER

have drugged her hot chocolate? If so, why? What was going on?

She was already drifting off again. Her mother was frowning, trying to tell her something, and Maria . . . there was Maria, alive and well at home. Home. Oh, she wanted to be home again . . . before Steele. Stop! This wasn't real. It seemed real, so real, she could almost feel the pampas' breeze, almost feel the touch of her father as he reached for her. No. She was slipping away from logic and into fantasy. She had to fight it. She couldn't allow her mind to be taken over in this fashion.

Up! She told herself, Get up! Find Molly; get help now. Up, Dawn Cesares. She managed to rise and drape her wrapper round her wet body. She held a nearby chair for support and made the distance to the bellrope, and then she moved to collapse on the bed. It was so much easier to let go, to speedily drift into another time, a familiar realm where she was once again a princess, and the only man in her life was her father. How simple it all had been then! How nice to feel it once more. There, José, her young brother, running to give her a flower, laughing as he fell in the tall grass.

Molly found her mistress nearly unconscious on the bed. She touched her shoulder, calling to her, "Miss . . . oh, please, miss, be ye all right? Miss?"

Who was that calling her? Dawn opened her eyes to find Molly leaning over her, and she smiled wanly. "Hallo, dear." She wasn't quite sure what she should say. Drugged. That's right. She was under the influence of some unknown drug, perhaps laudanum. "Molly . . . get Lady Amherst." That's it. Sarah would know what to do.

"Oh, no; oh, no," fretted Molly. "Her ladyship went

out early this morning . . . but she should be back soon." And then, wringing her hands, "What is it, miss. Ye can trust me. Please, why be ye like this?"

"Molly . . . I think my hot chocolate was drugged." Dawn was sitting up now. She was ever so weary, and she had a strong urging to put her head down and go to sleep, but first, first, she had to make it known.

Molly gasped. "Oh, no . . . who would be doing such a thing?"

"Stay here, Molly, till Lady Amherst returns." She had to sleep. She was so tired.

"That oi will, miss. Oi won't let anyone near ye, oi won't!" And so, Molly, her arms folded across her middle, took up her vigil.

Steele's brow went up as his butler offered the silver salver. He took up the sealed letter from the tray and dismissed the man to read it in private, after which he released a soft curse. "Damn! Of all the ill timing."

Well, there was nothing for it. He was needed in London to handle the final purchase of some property he had been after for a long time. He would have to go, and how he would keep from worrying about Dawn at Windy Towers was more than he could fathom. If only there were time, he would stop off to see her before he left. He glanced at the mantelshelf clock and saw the hour wanted five minutes to nine. Well, so much for that.

He called for his tiger and phaeton to be readied, and he hurried upstairs to change for the journey. He would drive himself, as he was something of a whip and knew well the knack of wielding a high-perch phaeton. He thought of Dawn. Such a fine little woman. She stirred feelings he

had never experienced before. He knew he was possessive about her where he had never been so in regards to any other female. He wanted to please her. He wanted her to admire him. He wanted to have her near. Her voice tickled his senses. Her laughter brightened his soul. Her affection touched his heart, and hell! He was being maudlin about a woman. What was this?

Just what was this? Her name was Dawn Cesares. She was a lady in every sense of the word. She was an imp, a sprite, a sensual woman. Her violet eyes pierced his armor and touched his nerve endings. Her touch ignited all his passions. She was a woman-child who asked nothing of him. He wanted her under his protection. He wanted her safe from all others. He wanted her. That was the key. He found that he no sooner quit her company than he was yearning to be with her again. He couldn't get enough of her. This had to stop. It had to stop now.

He was a man, and a man should not allow his life to revolve around a woman. She was so trusting. She yielded herself to his will. Enough. She was female, and females had their place. He would go to London and put her out of mind, at least for the moment.

The dowager entered Windy Towers to find Molly screeching for her and tugging at the sleeve of her ornately embroidered heavy wool coat. "Just a minute, girl. Here, help me with this thing." She was slipping out of it, handing it to Molly with her hat and gloves. Molly in turn plopped it in the butler's arms and then tugged on the mauve silks of her ladyship's gown.

"What the deuce is wrong with you, girl?" The dowager was coming along in tow but frowning.

"Miss Cesares . . . please, Lady Amherst."

"Dawn? What has happened to Dawn?" Lady Amherst's countenance was grim, and her tone was sharp.

Molly, however, did not answer but proceeded ahead of her ladyship at a brisk trot up the stairs. Lady Amherst's movements could be sprightly when she chose, and Molly marveled at how quickly her ladyship took the stairs now. They entered Dawn's room, where Molly closed the door at their backs.

"Dawn!" Sarah moved to her and took up her hand. "What is this? Are you ill, love? Dawn?"

Dawn opened her eyes. Sarah. She could hear Sarah's voice, and it was quite a pleasant sensation. Pleasant enough to leave her dreams and open her eyes. "Hallo, my Sarah," she said on a soft note.

"What is this?" Sarah turned to Molly.

"She has been drifting in and out of sleep for more than an hour now. She says . . . she says someone . . . oh, lordy . . ."

"Speak up, girl! What does your mistress say?" Sarah's hazel eyes were dark with suspicion.

"She says that someone must have drugged her hot chocolate . . . but, Lady Amherst, there was only Cook . . . and Gilly, the day girl . . . and then me, who brought it up."

Lady Amherst considered this piece of information, eyed the china cup for a long moment, took it up, sniffed the remaining contents, and then in one gulp downed what was left of the now cold chocolate.

Molly gasped, "Oh, no, Lady Amherst, oh, no!"

"Hush, girl. We will soon see if it was the chocolate drink." She shook her head. "For my money, it wasn't." She turned to Dawn, and in an authoritative voice that was

WILD DAWN FEVER

nearly harsh, she commanded, "Sit up, girl. I want you to sit up and concentrate on staying awake." Then to Molly, "Stay with her. I shall return presently."

"But . . . yer ladyship . . . where be ye going?"

"To the kitchen, for I mean to get to the bottom of this!"

Dawn watched Lady Amherst leave the room and frowned after her. She didn't want her to leave. The door closed, and Dawn turned to look dolefully at Molly. "She is angry with me."

"No, no, miss, she isn't, truly."

"Molly, I am so weary . . . what I need is quick energy." Dawn was indeed concentrating on pulling herself out of her drifting dreams. "Would you please bring me that box of chocolates on the sideboard table?"

Molly found the box and put it in her mistress's hands, but even as she did, something, she didn't know what, made her want to snatch it away again. "Oh, miss, me-thinks ye best be waiting for her ladyship. She'll know what ye should be eating."

Dawn giggled. "Absurd girl. Chocolate won't hurt . . . and Sarah will take it away. She will say I mustn't get fat, but I'm not fat, am I?"

"No, miss, that ye ain't." But she wrung her hands together as Dawn plopped a chocolate into her mouth.

"Here, Molly," Dawn pushed the box at her. "You are such a thin little thing; you could eat the entire contents of this box without having it show on you."

Molly shook her head. "No, miss, thank ye. My insides are turned all about wit worry over ye. Oi jest couldn't. Whot's more, oi don't think ye should be eating anything more till her ladyship gets back." Gently, cautiously, lest

her mistress object, she took away the box and set it on the nightstand.

Belowstairs, Lady Amherst swept the kitchen and investigated the cook with distinguished style and authority. Her years and her experience had taught her well, and when she had done, she was fairly certain that Dawn had not received any drugs in her chocolate drink. Besides, fifteen minutes had elapsed, and she was not feeling any ill effects from the drink. How, then, was Dawn drugged? What was used? Why did Dawn's state of dreaminess seem so familiar to her?

Her aged face was drawn in deep concentration as she made her way back up the main staircase and down the corridor to Dawn's bright room. There she found Molly leaning over her mistress, who was in a slump on the floor. Her old hazel eyes opened wide as she went forward, but Molly would only wring her hands and wail at the top of her lungs.

"What the deuce is going on? What has happened to your mistress?" Lady Amherst demanded in her most regal tones.

Molly was already terrified. That she was fond of Dawn was a fact; however, there, too, was the fear for self-preservation. Would the Lady Amherst blame her for this new development? She opened her mouth and released a caterwauling that brought the butler to the open door poshaste. Sarah turned to him and advised him that she wanted his mistress carried to the bed. Hurriedly he did this and was then dismissed without explanation. Lady Amherst once more applied herself to unraveling the mystery.

WILD DAWN FEVER

"Molly! Do be quiet at once. Indeed, if we are to help our dear Miss Cesares, you must tell me what happened while I was gone."

Molly sniffed. "Is she going to . . . to die?" It looked as though her mistress were not even breathing.

Lady Amherst's brow went up, and she touched Dawn's wrist. The pulse was barely there. She moved to the bellrope and pulled. The butler was there at once, for he had not been far away. Dawn had quickly won the interest and beginnings of affection in her staff.

"Send a groom for the doctor, Jarby."

"Yes, m'lady. Right away." And he was gone.

Sarah turned to Molly. "Now, explain."

"It wasn't me fault," Molly wailed. "Faith, oi loves Mistress, oi do."

"Of course you do, and no one has said it is your fault. Now, Molly, if you do care for your mistress, please, please, for heaven's sake, tell me what has happened in my absence!" The dowager was near to grinding her teeth.

"Yes, m'lady." Molly wiped her wet face with her apron and adjusted her mobcap. "Miss, she, wanted energy . . . said to bring her the chocolate."

"The hot chocolate? I don't understand," put in Lady Amherst.

"No, m'lady, the box of chocolates."

The dowager moved to the nightstand and took up the box. "Proceed," she ordered, as she opened the box and took a long whiff. What was there about these chocolates that smelled familiar?

"Aye, so she ate one whole, she did. Thin as she is, she smiled and said ye would be telling her not to. Then, then she wanted to walk . . . said it would do her good, but no

sooner did she start, than all at once she looked at me strange and her voice, it was just a whisper. She called me name, she did, and then again, wi' 'Molly . . . the cho . . .' and she fainted in a slump. But she was like dead, she was.'"

Of course, thought the dowager. The drug was in the chocolates. Drug? Which drug had been used? Laudanum would not have such a devastating effect. Four chocolates were missing. Dawn had had one last night, which would explain her dreamy state last evening. She had had one with her drink this morning and now another—oh, mercy! Opium! That was what the scent of the chocolate reminded her of. It was heavily laced with opium, and if she was not wrong, Dawn had overdosed on it!

Chapter Fifteen

With the advent of the day, Charles arrived at Windy Towers to pay a call. He was taken into the library, where, after a considerable time, the dowager appeared. She had changed her gown and was somberly dressed in a day gown of soft violet. Her short gray curls had been neatly brushed, but there was a look of anger about her eyes and a touch of fatigue in her walk.

Charles went forward at once. "Sarah . . . my lady, is something amiss?"

She looked at him long and said on a hard note. "Yes, my dear Charles. Something is dreadfully amiss."

"What?" A look of astonishment touched his countenance as he asked, "Dawn? Is it Dawn? What has happened? What is wrong?"

"Sit down, won't you, Charles?" Lady Amherst was already dropping wearily into the comfortable pillows of the large yellow sofa. She waited for him to pull up the chair across from her. She then poured him a cup of tea, poured

out another for herself, but instead of sipping at it, she placed it back down onto the silver tray. "I can't touch this. I am afraid it wouldn't stay down." She cast him a look of appraisal, and then relayed in her blunt fashion, "It just doesn't make sense . . ."

"Forgive me, Sarah, but I don't understand. What is wrong?"

"I am fairly certain that young Drake has made an attempt on Dawn's life," she said with sadness.

This moved Charles out of his seat. "What?" It was nearly a shriek.

"Do sit down," the dowager chastised him. She waited a moment for him to obey and then proceeded, "Drake presented Dawn with a box of chocolates quaintly inscribed with her name. She had one piece last evening and very nearly immediately became . . . foxed, in a dream-like state. Not realizing the chocolates contained anything that could induce such a state, Dawn had another this morning with her morning hot drink. She drifted into a drug-induced fantasy, but she retained her senses enough to send for me. Unfortunately, while I was downstairs with Cook, investigating our immediate suspicions, she, in the belief that she needed a natural stimulant to help her walk about, well, she ate yet another piece of chocolate, which very nearly caused an overdose in her system." She took a long breath without fear of interruption, for Charles was frozen with the news, and his mouth was rigidly open.

"We called for the doctor, who confirmed my suspicions. The chocolates that Drake gave her are heavily laced with . . . *opium!*" She shook her head. "If she had eaten two, three at a time, as some people do with choco-

WILD DAWN FEVER

late, she might now not be sleeping, she would be dead!" It was said on a hard note.

Charles was attempting to make some sense of these facts but couldn't. "It doesn't—I can't believe—"

"Nor can I. As I said, it does not make sense for Drake to attempt to murder Dawn if he wants her fortune. He would be better served by trying to marry her."

Charles was thinking a touch more clearly now, and he put in thoughtfully, "Hold now. If Drake believed that Dawn would never marry him, perhaps he might stoop to another device."

"Such as killing her with opium?" The dowager was incredulous.

"Ah, he did not mean to kill her. Drake is something of a fool. He does not think past his desires. All he knew was that he might make her dependent on opium, and when that happened, she would then become dependent on him. Such is the mind we are dealing with."

Sarah's hazel eyes lighted with understanding. "Of course!" Then she shook her head. "Such a stupid boy. What if I had taken a chocolate? What if she had offered it around?"

"It was a chance he took. Remember, he meant it only for her; had her name inscribed on each piece; thought perhaps if anyone else managed to get a bite, they would enjoy a bit of fantasy and not understand its cause. That is Drake! I don't think for a minute he meant to kill her. It is just one of his plans . . . gone wrong."

"I see," said Sarah. "And how do you propose to protect her from Drake in the future? I do not wish a scandal over this. I can trust the doctor to be discreet, but

... we do not want the servants carrying more than they know already."

Charles stood up. "Trust me to handle Drake, my lady." He bent over her hand, and when he straightened, assured her, "I mean to go to Drake right now, but I won't be able to return tonight. I am promised to Stacy and her father for the evening."

"Then, good day to you, Charles. I wish I could tell you to advise Drake that he is no longer welcome at Windy Towers, but it is not my place to do such a thing, and Dawn . . . I am afraid that she has too forgiving a nature to do so herself."

"Don't worry, my lady. Drake will not come near Windy Towers for many a day." Already a plan was forming in his head. Already his devious heart was at work!

Charles stopped his horse and watched Stacy canter her animal across Drake Stafford's overgrown, ill-kept park and take to the woods. So, Stacy had been visiting Drake in his bachelor home. There was something in that knowledge that was worse than all the rest. Oh, he had known about Drake and Stacy for some months. Even when he had first found out about them, it had not been such a total shock. However, that Stacy should risk her reputation by visiting Drake in his own establishment was something he could not casually accept. She was about to become his wife, Lady Redcliff, and she owed it to the name to be discreet about such affairs. He would have to talk to her.

He waited a few more minutes and then took the long route to the country road and then up the circular, badly rutted drive to the stable. There was no use going to the

WILD DAWN FEVER

front door, as Drake's household did not contain grooms enough to fetch a visitor's horse. He loosened his girth after dismounting, removed his bridle, and put his horse into an empty stall before making his way to the front door.

Some minutes went by before he was taken to the study, where he found Drake standing in his shirtsleeves. He could see Drake's vest and coat slung over a wooden chair, and he sneered instead of saying hello.

"Well, I hope I gave you enough time to dress after Stacy's visit."

Drake was taken aback, and his mouth drooped open for a long moment before he replied, "You observed Stacy leaving here?"

"I did, and I don't wish any ridiculous explanations, please. I have known about you two for some months, and all I ask is that you conduct yourselves with more discretion in the future."

Drake sat down heavily in his chair, and he looked at his boots. "What do you want, Charles?"

"My dear cousin." Charles started as he took up a wooden chair and straddled it. "Did you really think that you would make an opium addict out of our little Dawn with no one the wiser?"

Drake's eyes snapped, and then once more he was looking at his boots. "I don't know what you are talking about."

"Don't you?"

"Oh, shut up, Charles!" Drake hissed. "I have had enough of you forever lording it over me. By a quirk of fate you became the earl. If you were dead, the title, the

money, Stacy, would all be mine! So, shut up . . . just shut up. I did what I thought I had to do.”

“That is all very well, Cousin, but, you see, the dowager believes your intent was to kill our dearest Dawn.”

“What?” Drake jumped to his feet.

“Oh, yes, and what is more, she actually thought that you might then turn on me. After all, Dawn and I do, as you have just said, stand in your way to title and money.”

“She can’t believe that! How in thunder could I manage such a thing without falling under suspicion?”

“Ah, but murder is such a difficult thing to prove,” Charles answered. “The dowager means to have you watched . . . and in this instance, I must say, Drake, it is no wonder. Lacing Dawn’s chocolates with opium. Do you know she nearly died this morning? Do you know that you could have brought scandal to our name if she had?”

“Died? Nearly died?” Drake was stunned. “Why . . . how . . .?”

“Fool! She ate your chocolates all right . . . one after the other. What if she had eaten four, maybe five?” Charles shook his head. “Didn’t you think, man?”

Drake ran his hand through his hair. “Charles, I would never hurt Dawn. Yes, I wanted to, to entice her to marry me. Yes, have her dependent on me, but, I swear, I would never harm her.”

“Having a young bride addicted to opium isn’t harming her, eh, Drake?”

“That . . . that was something else . . . another matter. I would have handled it. I care for Dawn. Honestly, Charles, you must believe me.”

“Actually, I do believe you. However, I think it would

WILD DAWN FEVER

be wise if you stayed out of sight for a few days. Remember that little hunting box I own in Ringwood?"

"Yes."

"Take a few things and go there. Stay out of sight . . . just until the dowager's bristles soften."

"Aye. Good notion. I'll do that."

Charles stood up and moved to take up his riding coat and hat. He turned at the study door. "Right away, Drake."

"Yes, yes . . . and, Charles, thank you."

Charles smiled to himself and he thought, Dolt! He was using Drake. If anything went wrong tonight . . . if murder was suspected instead of the robbery setup, all eyes would turn to Drake. It would be said that Drake had paid and staged a robbery to get Dawn out of the way. It would be said that Drake was next in line, that Drake was behind the accident that Charles would plan for himself. Oh, yes, if anything went wrong . . . Charles knew just how to save himself, even if it meant getting wounded in the process, even if it meant watching Drake hang!

Chapter Sixteen

*I*t was a clear, cold night. An enormous fire burned in great flames in the fireplace of Dawn's room. It was early yet, but she had retired with a book, leaving the dowager to relax in her own rooms. She had been feeling much better for some hours, only she couldn't shake her sense of despondency.

She had written a short note to Steele and had sent a groom to Norington House, asking the boy to wait for a reply. He had returned and advised her that Norington was in London. From that moment on, her gloom increased with every hour. That he was not here, now, when she so needed him, was beyond everything. Of course, she told herself reasonably, how would he know you need him? Besides, he owes you nothing. You are not his; he is not yours. A relationship does not exist. He wants you. Only wants you. He doesn't love you. He has never said he loves you. Thus she went reeling further into depression.

What was it about her that would make Meza want to

WILD DAWN FEVER

violate her? Make Drake attempt to seduce her with opium? Why? And Charles, even Charles, was not to be trusted. He had visited her in the late afternoon. He had said he was promised to Stacy and her father for the evening but that he had to see her well, see her smiling. Ah, so he had said, just before he attempted to kiss her, beg for her hand in marriage, and when she had refused, what had he said? "Very well, Dawn . . . I tried."

How very strange, she thought. What sort of a thing was that to say? He tried. Very well, he tried. Just what did that mean? Men. They were all turning out to be so very different from the men she had grown up to know and understand. Surely her father could not be compared to these strange English creatures? Oh, Steele. If only you would come. . . .

The hours ticked by, and she was unable to sleep, unable to concentrate on a book. Her thoughts moved into many; were repeated, dissected, reweaved, and discarded. She stood and moved to poke at the logs in the grate, when something outside her window caught her attention. All at once her spirits lifted, and heedless of her scanty attire, she rushed to open the long glass. It was, however, with some shocked surprise that she found there not Steele, but Tim Clark.

"Timmy!" she ejaculated as she stood back and held her pale pink wrapper round herself. "Timmy Clark, whatever are you doing on my balcony?"

She had surprised him as well, and he made some attempt at meeting her look, gave it up, and contemplated the stone floor of the balcony instead. "Evening, Dawnie girl," he said, his cheeks flooding with color.

She took his arm and pulled him within, but as she did

so, his heavy wool coat opened, and she noticed a large horse pistol stuck into his waistband. Her violet eyes opened wide, and she said, "Timmy . . . what . . . what is going on?"

"Aw, now . . . oi feel loike a blessed fool," he complained with a sigh.

"Well, it is obvious that something is going on. Why don't you sit down and tell me what that is?"

"Oi was jest doing me rounds."

"Your rounds? Past my bedroom? Explain," she said, her foot tapping the carpet, her arms folded across her middle.

"Aye." He plopped down in the cushioned wing chair by the fire and looked up at her. "Cap'n . . . he said we was to come by and protect ye."

"Protect me? From what?" She was amazed.

"From them thieves, ye know, the ones that's been about lately." He shook his head. "Said me and two of the lads was to come by . . . armed and do the rounds . . . but oi was t'only one to stand guard by yer window." This last he said with some pride, but this feeling was short-lived, as at that moment Dawn's bedroom door was kicked open with some zeal, and Dawn found herself staring at two men holding guns pointed directly at her.

"Well, well . . . 'ere is a bit of meat . . . lookee!" said Mr. Tibbs; then as he saw Timmy move his hand: "Oi wouldn't do that, lad . . . not unless ye be wishful of losing yer life." To the tall, dirty man beside him, he motioned with a jerk of his head. The fellow hurried to relieve Timmy of his gun, sticking it into his own waistband with a sound very much like a growl.

"How . . . how did you get into my home?" Dawn was

WILD DAWN FEVER

stalling for time. Keep them talking, her father had once told her when they had been attacked by bandits. Keep their attention on themselves. Build up their egos. Stall for time.

"Mr. Tibbs knows whot he be doing," he said with a grunt. "It was easy enough. We saw at once ye had a man prowling about, so we put out his lights for a time."

"What did you do with him?" Timmy demanded.

Mr. Tibbs laughed. "He be trussed up with t'other in the stables." He shook his head, "All yer people 'ave been trussed up, with one of me men looking 'em over right and fine. They won't be no trouble,"—he looked her over meaningfully—"and no 'elp to ye, either, so, first things first—be a good little girl, and let's 'ave yer sparklers."

"With the greatest of pleasure, but first, sir, what have you done with Lady Amherst?" Dawn demanded. Inside she was trembling, but she wouldn't allow this man to see it. She could hear another of his men shouting belowstairs at her servants. No doubt they had rounded up her house staff into one room.

"Aw, now, lass, oi'd be worrit about meself if oi were ye . . . not about the old mort down the hall."

She understood from this that they had already found and overpowered Sarah. What she needed to know was how many of these ruffians were loose? She shook her head. "It just amazes me how so many of you could storm my home without me hearing any of you?"

He shrugged his shoulders and smiled so that she had a full view of his black, broken teeth. "'Ow many do ye think it toikes? Lord love ye, girl, we took yer castle 'ere wi' but six men and meself, we did." He nodded proudly

over the fact. "Knows me business, oi do, 'aven't oi told ye?"

"Yes, you have, and I will get you my jewels and all the cash I have in my home. Then you will be so kind as to leave my people and me alone."

He chuckled over this and answered, "Yer people we'll leave be, but ye, m'darlin girl, well, now, oi don't think so."

"The hell you won't!" Timmy suddenly moved to shove Dawn behind him.

"Aw, now, lad, step away, do . . . or oi will jest 'ave to blow ye away and 'ave done wi' it," said Mr. Tibbs sweetly.

Dawn entreated Tim in a low voice as she urged him to one side, "Please, Tim . . . don't fuss. We don't want to upset these men."

"That's the ticket, m'girl. Ye tell him, do, tell him 'ow's ye don't mean to upset us." Mr. Tibbs grinned, but then his face changed suddenly. "'Ere now, 'urry up and gets the sparklers, oi say; oi don't want to be 'ere all night!"

Dawn moved to an ornately gilded ivory cabinet and produced a key from one of a small set of drawers. She then unlocked a long narrow door within this cabinet. While she went about this, she quietly, deftly, took up a bottle of perfume and carefully uncapped it. She withdrew a leather satchel of some size, a wad of bills, and turned toward Mr. Tibbs.

"There are some very fine diamonds in this satchel. My late great-aunt had excellent taste in jewelry. Indeed, you should fetch a pretty penny with this night's work." She scooped out of the satchel a large, heavily jeweled neck-

WILD DAWN FEVER

lace as she spoke and allowed him to feast his greedy eyes as she moved closer still.

Her heart was pounding in her chest. So much depended on every movement now. He held out his hand. "Give them over, girl!" Mr. Tibbs demanded.

"Of course!" answered Dawn, but then suddenly, swiftly, and with skill, she threw the contents of the perfume bottle directly into his eyes.

She ran for the open door. The man holding his gun on Timmy let go with a wild shot but was immediately bowled over by Tim. The gun skidded across the floor, and the two wrestled on the ground. Mr. Tibbs was blinded by the burning liquid and screamed for his men. It was just enough time for Dawn to speed down the dimly lighted corridor to the servants' stairs, where instead of descending, she took toward the attic.

Dawn's heart was beating wildly. There was only one chance. She had to get to the Jacobean escape route. Her late great-aunt had taken her through it some years ago, fascinating her with the history of the stairs and its tunnel to the stables. If she could get to it undetected, she just might be able to get to horse and help.

She ran to the storage room at the end of the landing and there lighted a candle, taking it with her to what appeared to be an old, worn wardrobe closet. She opened it, searched around for the spring latch, and with a sigh of relief, pulled it out. She covered her candle, backed into the hidden corridor, closing the wardrobe closet before her, and then the secret door. Only then did she discover she was actually once again holding her breath.

The corridor moved east for twenty feet. She slid her hand along the cold, dry stone walls until she came to the

narrow, circular stone steps. There was no railing, but she had the one wall flanking the narrow winding stairs. "Oh, God . . ." she breathed out loud. "Oh, please, let me get to help!"

Chapter Seventeen

*S*teele arrived home secure in the knowledge that he had put three of his young, sturdy crew members to guard his treasure at Windy Towers, and that was how he thought of Dawn—as his treasure. All day she had been on his mind. She was his precious prize. He had stolen her from the sea, and damn, he meant to keep her.

He was weary as he shrugged out of his greatcoat and flung it with his top hat onto a nearby hall chair. He then moved toward the library, pulling at his cravat, easing out of his tailcoat, unbuttoning his vest. He entered the library and found his butler at his back.

“My lord,” said the elderly retainer, “I can see that you are weary from your long trip, but there is a note on your desk I think you might wish to have at once.”

Steele eyed the man with a smile and patted his shoulder. “Thank you. I will take it up immediately.” He moved toward the desk, took up the sealed notepaper, and his brow went up, for the seal was that of Windy Towers. Hurriedly he slit it open to read:

Dearest Steele,

You have been proved right once more. You didn't trust Drake Stafford, and as it turned out, I should not have trusted him, either.

Perhaps, if you find a moment, you might stop by to see me today. I should like it ever so much.

Dawn

Steele frowned. She sounded all right. Drake couldn't have harmed her. Yet there was something in the tone of the missive, something that disturbed him.

He was tired. Perhaps his visit could wait till the morning. She would be safe enough. Timmy was there, personally guarding her, wasn't he? Indeed. No need to go to Windy Towers this night. No need at all. So then, hell and blazes, why was he ringing for his horse? Why the devil was he going to his gun case? Just what in thunder was he doing?

He moved by instinct. He couldn't say what it was that made him ready his weapon, shove it into his cummerbund, and tell his servant to bring him his riding cloak. He wanted to be able to move easily, deftly, and he didn't need a lot of clothes hindering him. Hell! Why? There was nothing in her letter to indicate that she had been in danger, was in danger still. She was his Dawn, his heart, and it occurred to him suddenly that he probably could live without her, but he damn well didn't wish to.

The realization nearly stunned him. This little package of flesh and blood had somehow touched his soul, won his heart. How had such a thing happened? Yes, she was beautiful. Yes, she was seductive, sensual, provocative,

WILD DAWN FEVER

pleasing, but he had known others who had been quite lovely as well. What was it about this imp that had moved him?

He took to horse, this question looming in his mind. Dawn, sweet wild Dawn. All he knew was that he had made her his own, and he wasn't about to let any other get too near her . . . in any manner.

Mr. Tibbs was in a state of severe agitation. He relieved this to some extent by screaming at his men, who came in response to his call. He had already exhibited some violence by bringing the butt of his gun down on poor Timmy's head when Tim had got the better of Tibbs's man. This fellow picked himself off the ground, kicking the now unconscious Tim in the process, but he, in turn, received a slap across his ear and was told to get lively.

"Find that girl! Oi want her . . . do ye hear . . . oi want her meself!"

Dawn had made it to the tunnel, but when she was only partially down its length, she slipped and dropped her candle. It rolled, and before she could catch it up, it went out. She stood in the total darkness a moment and gave vent to a sure degree of exasperation, then collected herself and said to no one in particular, "It's nothing to fret. All I have to do is continue in the same direction . . . just run my hand along the wall . . . never mind the slime . . . the spiders, the . . . whatever . . . never mind. . . ." She started off again, slowly. Oh, faith, she was so worried about the dowager, about Timmy. Would they hurt Timmy? If only she had a gun. She put up the collar of her silk wrapper, for she was shivering with the cold. Her silk-slipped feet were nearly soaked through because of the

damp ground she had already covered. A sudden fear grabbed hold of her heart. When she had last made this route with her late aunt (why had she ever thought it exciting?), well, when she had made it last, it was easy enough to push through at its end and find herself in a hidden closet of sorts. What if that were presently exposed? Had any changes been made inside the stables? What if the door wouldn't push open?

She reached the tunnel's end. She couldn't see a thing, so she felt for the panel, discovered the ring, and cautiously heaved her weight. It creaked, and she stopped. She waited a long moment, her heart beating dangerously fast, and then once more gave the panel a push. She nearly screamed as it went forward, because something, she was certain it was a rat, scurried over her foot. However, she was able to control herself and stifle the scream.

Dawn moved up the three steps into yet another compartment and found there enough of a crack in the door to utilize for surveillance. From this crack she could see that the two stable-boys and the elderly groom had been tied up, gagged, and pressed up against a stall door together. She couldn't see any of Tibbs's men, but then she nearly collapsed when one of them came running into the stable to announce, "There be trouble! Whot did oi tell ye, Gramps . . . Didn't oi tell ye Tibbs had gone too far this time? Ye can't go into the flash homes and truss up all the flash coves without the earth opening up!"

"Whot ye mean, laddie?" said the older highwayman.

"It's the girl . . . the one Tibbs means to . . . put under. She run off, and they can't find her. Look, Gramps . . . oi'm fer loping off. It's always been jest the two of us and the road . . . and we been all right . . .

WILD DAWN FEVER

'aven't we? We don't need to run with Tibbs. It don't suit us."

"Hush up, laddie. Ye want Tibbs to blow yer head off? Ye don't know where he is and what he can hear."

"He wants us up at the house to 'elp find her. Oi don't loikes it. Oi don't hold with killing a female . . . especially a flash female."

"Don't ye, laddie?" The older man shook his head. "Truth is . . . oi don't 'ave me 'eart in this, either. . . ." They started off toward the house.

Dawn waited another moment just to be safe and then eased herself out of her hiding place. Quickly she took up a knife from its casing on the wall and moved to cut the ropings holding her grooms in place when a voice at her back stalled her sharply. "Aw, now, miss . . . oi be that sorry . . . but oi'll be asking ye to put away the knife and stand aside. If ye don't . . . oi'll be obliged to shoot ye." It was the older man called Gramps.

Dawn put down the knife as near to one of her grooms as she could, and she stared long and hard at the elderly toby. "I have done what you asked. Does that mean you won't shoot me?" She smiled sweetly at him and looked at the younger man beside him.

"Gramps . . . let her go. . . . Let's get out of 'ere. . . ."

"Eh, laddie, we can't do that. Go up to the house and tell Tibbs we 'ave the chit safe and sound. Let 'im come and get her."

"But, Gramps—"

"Now! Ye 'ear me, laddie. Do it now . . . and mayhap we'll never 'ave to do it again."

A hard masculine voice at their backs and in the dark-

ness of the stable door's threshold came firm and clear. "Oh, you'll never be *able* to do it again! I promise you!"

Dawn nearly cried with relief. The older man, Gramps, turned, his gun pointed, but his partner had already dropped his weapon and put up his hands. "Don't shoot. . . . Gramps . . . put away yer barking iron. . . . It's over. . . . Gramps . . ."

"Do as the boy tells you, Gramps, for it is indeed quite over!" Steele commanded. He did not want to fire a shot, for they would hear it up at the house. He had known something was wrong when he had not been able to find Timmy. Quietly he had done a survey and discovered that there were indeed intruders within the estate. Not knowing where Tim was, he came to free his other men, who he had assumed were tied up in the stable. Finding Dawn there and under fire had sent a cold piece of steel right through him. That anyone should dare point a gun at Dawn, his Dawn, was more than he could stand. It sharpened his senses and his fighting instincts.

Gramps felt Steele's determination and knew indeed that it was over. He dropped his gun. Steele moved within, kicked the weapon across the floor, and allowed Dawn, who had rushed to him, to fling her arms round his waist. "Oh, Steele, I knew you would come. I just knew it."

He kissed the top of her head and said, "Untie those men of yours and find mine." To Gramps he directed his next question: "There were two men . . . sailors of a sort, armed and patrolling the grounds. What was done with them?"

"They be tied up in the stall over there." Gramps indicated with his chin.

"Go and untie them," said Steele, and then to the first

WILD DAWN FEVER

of the grooms who was freed, he ordered, "Help make sure they are untied quickly."

It didn't take long before a plan of action had been formed. One of the three stable hands was sent to fetch a magistrate. The other two and Steele's two crewmen were armed with both guns and candles and sent into the tunnel. Steele watched them vanish into the secret corridor and turned to hug Dawn to him. "You, my little mermaid, are a wonder!"

"Me? Oh, no," she said, planting a sweet kiss on his lips. "It is you. A hero in the nick of time. A knight in shining armor! A—"

"A man very much in love with you."

It was the first time he had ever admitted his feelings for her, and she was stunned. She took a moment, a sigh, and then held to him long. "Steele, I love you so much."

"When we get to the house, you are to stay in the tunnel," he commanded then.

"Ha! Fat chance."

"What kind of talk is that? You will do as your future husband thinks best."

"My . . . future husband" she whispered, and then put up her chin, "may request anything he wants . . . but I still hold the right to decide when to obey!"

Steele kissed her long and hungrily then, but took her shoulders as he felt himself stirred and put her resolutely aside.

"Come on, then, sweetheart. We get to the house, and you stay within the safety of the tunnel. I won't brook an argument on this."

She started to open her mouth and then shut it. Better not to argue with him. They reached the end of the tunnel,

and she did, for a time, stay in place. It was irritating, though, for she could see nothing, hear nothing. What was going on? What was taking so long?

Steele and his little band had the element of surprise, and they had Timmy. As they moved, stalked, and found first one and then another and quietly knocked these fellows out, Timmy had stirred. He had groaned and discovered a goodly sized lump on his head. He shook himself into readiness, searched, and found his pistol on the floor and nearly bumped headlong into Steele.

Steele was well pleased to find his first mate relatively unharmed, and took a moment to shake the lad's shoulders. "There is a man called Tibbs," Timmy said on a whisper. "He is in charge of all this."

"Where is he?"

"I don't know, Captain, but I did hear someone large, heavy, taking the main staircase just a moment ago."

Dawn couldn't stand it any longer. She had to find out for herself what was happening. She opened the wardrobe and stepped out and into the arms of Mr. Tibbs.

"Oh, no!" She cried in some distress.

"Well, well, lookee. 'Ave ye been hiding yerself away in that all this time? Ye cost us a mite a trouble ye did, and oi'm afraid that will cost ye, my chit, cost ye plenty!"

In answer to this, Dawn screamed at the top of her lungs, "STEELE!"

It was all that was needed. It caused Tibbs to slap her hard, and she fell back from the impact. It brought Steele and Timmy running posthaste but not before he had dis-

patched his men to look for the remaining three thieves in the house.

Steele came upon Tibbs as that scoundrel bent to grab Dawn's wrist and pull her to her feet, and his voice clicked in tune to the sound of his pistol cocking. "Step away from the lady, or I will forget I have questions for you and put a bullet through your ugly face right now!"

Tibbs was surprised and stood stock-still. He made an attempt: "Aw, now, guv . . . there ye be . . . no one 'urt. . . . Mayhap we can strike up a bargain."

"A bargain?" Steele turned to Timmy. "Relieve this pig of his weapons."

"Aye . . . that's it . . . toikes them . . ." He put out his arms to give Timmy room. "See . . . oi ain't fussing, then . . . right ye are. Let me go, and mayhap oi'll be telling ye whot oi really be doing 'ere and why." Mr. Tibbs was desperate.

"You'll be telling me that, anyway." Steele smiled, and there was no mistaking the meaning.

"Aw, now, oi don't think so." Mr. Tibbs shook his head.

"Why? Do you mean to hang for this alone and let a smart like the Earl of Redcliff sail home free?"

Dawn gasped and went near him now, touching his free hand. "Charles? What does Charles have to do with all this?"

"If I am not mistaken, he engineered it, and the hit at Abbet Castle last evening. He is next in line, my love."

"You mean, Charles . . . wanted me *dead*?" It was scarcely a whisper, such was her shock.

He held her to him then. "Never mind, sweetheart. He doesn't matter."

There wasn't time for more, for at that point shouts from belowstairs indicated that Steele's men had captured the last of the thieves and had freed the household servants. Heavy clanging at the front door brought on additional help as the magistrate arrived with his set of beadles.

Timmy motioned for Mr. Tibbs to move, but he stopped and looked straight into Steele's eyes. "Oi tell ye whot—it don't matter none to me if yer earl hangs or not, but oi won't mention his name unless ye deal wit me."

"I won't deal with you, and I will still manage to indict Charles for all of this."

"May ye rot in hell!" hissed Mr. Tibbs as Timmy led him away.

Dawn went into Steele's arms then and cried. All of this was bad enough, but to think of Charles . . . wanting her dead?

"Hush, love. Money and debts do strange things to a man's mind." He attempted to comfort her.

"What . . . what will happen?"

"We will see. Come . . . come let me put you to bed."

"Steele!" she objected.

He laughed out loud and kissed her forehead. "That isn't what I meant, you know. No, I mean to be respectable until we are married."

"Steele!" she objected again, and he laughed and held her to him, saying softly, "I love you, my mermaid."

Epilogue

*M*r. Tibbs, true to his word, refused to give evidence against the Earl of Redcliff; hence, no charges were brought to bear against Charles. Steele therefore took matters into his own hands, arranging for Charles to travel indefinitely while he and Dawn saw to the efficient running of Stafford House.

Stacy broke her engagement to Charles when she discovered that he was no longer able to support her in the fashion she so enjoyed. No, she did not marry Drake, but went to London and there ensnared a very fine, very wealthy baron.

Dawn would not allow the dowager to travel on to Cornwall, but had her preside over her wedding to his lordship, Steele Norington, which was quite beautiful. It wasn't long after the wedding that Steele decided that it was time to put to sea. He packed up his young bride, invited the dowager, and set his clipper for Argentina.

They stood on the deck of his ship, the wind in their

sails and the sun shining brightly. He held Dawn against his chest, his arms wrapped round her middle as he kissed her ear, her neck, and spoke softly, "Are you happy, my lady Norington?"

"Hmmm. More than I ever thought possible. Oh, Steele . . . what a wondrous man you are. I am so happy we are going to see my family."

"Yes, I rather thought I should let them see how nicely you have done for yourself!" He teased her with a smile.

She took his hand then and put it over her belly. "Don't you want to know why the timing is so perfect?" A little color flooded her cheeks.

Timmy came up at this juncture and grinned, for the wind had carried her words. "*Because* I am going to be an uncle! That's why! Isn't it?"

Steele was at first taken aback, and then with sure emotion he held her to him and kissed her long. Timmy whistled and moved along. He saw the dowager, winked, got his rump slapped for his efforts, and so it was.